God of Nothing

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God of Nothing

by machiavelli

Summary

The other orphans warn him about Tom Riddle, about the things that go missing, the way he makes people disappear. 'Stay off his radar' seems to be the advice.

Unfortunately for Harry, accidentally saving his life makes that rather difficult.

Translations: Chinese, Russian

- Translation into 中文-普通话 國語 available: 【授翻/长篇】无果之神 by Lolita0904
- Translation into Русский available: God of Nothing (a translation) by inriamene

stolen things

He stares up at the imposing brick, looming like some kind of sprawling, grey beast with sharp black gates as teeth. The words WOOLS ORPHANAGE glare down at him, and Harry thinks that somehow the architect managed to find the perfect font to inspire a kind of dull dread in the pit of the reader's stomach. That brief glance is all he gets before rough hands tug him forward, and the jaws yawn open to admit them.

His breath is coming out in icy white puffs, blending into an already colourless sky, and he shivers. He's still wearing his pyjama top under the thin jacket he'd been given by a police officer, can still smell the smoke ooze out with every step he takes. He lost the feeling in his toes a long time ago, and his fingers look raw and red, wet from his breath as he mechanically holds his hands up to his lips every few minutes to try to warm them.

The police officer told him he was small for his age - panicked chit-chat as he was ushered from the creaking black skeleton that used to be his home. The man's large hands had shook as they curled around the bones of Harry's shoulder. Or maybe it was Harry who had been shaking? In any case, he agrees - he only comes up to his social worker's chest. She's a distracted, frowning woman, dressed head to toe in thick black wool and her stupid little heels make a loud tap every time her ankle comes down on the ground.

Tap - tap - tap.

"Come along boy," she says, although the words lack any kind of heat. It's the third time she's spoken to him since meeting him at the police station this morning. Harry gets the feeling that she's stopped seeing their faces at this point. He's just the task for the day, a perfunctory box to be ticked, another nameless orphan ferried off to the knacker's yard of the city.

They walk up to the door, an imposing metal arch in the wall, and she raps twice with the back of her gloved hand, frowning as her knuckles come away smudged with dirt. She glances down at him again, as if to check he's still there, and they hear hurried footsteps echo behind the door. The social worker fixes a saccharine beam on her face, her eyes dull.

The door swings open creakily, but whoever's there is hidden behind the hulking shape of his companion.

"Oh." Her tone is surprised, and Harry peers round her waist.

There's nobody directly in front of him, but then his eyes drop and he sees a little girl. She's younger than him - probably around six, in a bobbly grey woollen jumper that hangs down as some kind of dress over her trousers. Her big blue eyes flit from the woman to Harry, before growing wide.

"Mumma Minnie!" she screams, eyes never leaving Harry's. "There's a new orphan at the door!"

Harry feels a slice of cold cut through his chest at the word. *Orphan*: his new identity. He forces down the images of his parents, feels the lump in his throat grow thick and hot. He told himself he wasn't going to cry and he won't. It takes a long, slow breath but his fingers unclench and the water lurking at the back of his eyes evaporates into the cold.

"Yes, well. Hello dear. May we come in?" the social worker says, already stepping past the little girl and into a narrow grey hallway. She grabs Harry's arm in a steel-taloned grip, pulling him in after her like he's deaf as well as mute.

She shuts the door behind them, thankfully cutting off the icy push of the wind, and suddenly all is quiet. Harry hears more footsteps, before a door at the end of the hallway flies open.

"Hullo there," an old, thin lady says, striding down the corridor. Harry takes her in: tall, slender, probably late forties, kind looking crows-feet adorning hard blue eyes and greying brown hair swept up in an elegant updo. Her dark green dress peeks out from under a thick black shawl. Her gaze is sharp, and she nods down at Harry as she speaks. "You're a little early, but better early than late I suppose. Nice to see you again, Ms. Dean. Please, follow me through to my office where it's warmer."

Whatever his social worker - who's name he now knows is Ms. Dean - says in response, Harry tunes it out. They follow Mumma Minnie through the twist of the corridor, up a set of stairs and eventually make their way to her office. It's tucked away in a corner at the back of the building, overlooking a bustling road. Horse and carriages trot past, with the occasional loud bang of a motorcar. Harry drags his eyes away and looks around. It's a rather plain office, with shabby but clean furniture and no paintings on the walls.

She settles them down on some rickety chairs, and Harry notices they've lost the girl from earlier. Ms. Dean remains standing, doesn't even take off her coat.

"Now, Minerva, I wish I could stay longer but I simply must head back to the office - I have a whole *stack* of paperwork regarding this one," she gestures at Harry with her stained glove, without looking at him, "and it's not going to do itself." She tinkles out the fakest laugh Harry has ever heard before inching towards the door. "So I do apologise for not seeing him in properly but I'm confident to leave him in your *more* than capable hands."

Mumma Minnie has just about gotten out some form of acquiescence before Ms. Dean slips out the door with a "good luck Harry!" echoing behind her.

Both occupants of the room share a look of bemusement, before Mumma Minnie's eyes soften and she lets out a small sigh.

"I'm terribly sorry to hear about your parents, Harry," she says softly, and he's strangely touched by the depth of sincerity in her voice. "I know that whatever I say won't be enough, but from experience, what you're feeling now will mellow. It just takes time. And for what it's worth, we're glad to have you."

Harry nods. He can't open his mouth or the sob will escape, so he just stares at the ground. The wooden floors are dark and scuffed, and he makes images out of the scratches. *A snake. An eye*. *A knife.*

"Now a couple of things to get you started. We sleep the boys in dormitories of six until fourteen, and then it's two to a room. We have lessons from the local Pastor five days a week for three hours, and attendance is compulsory. We have a strict chore rota, so that we all do our bit. Oh, and I expect you're wondering about food. Breakfast is at 7am sharp, Lunch at 12.30 and Dinner is at 6. If you miss it, you miss it; we don't do food at any other time.

"We've assigned you a buddy, Abernathy. He'll be waiting outside my office by now, I expect, and can show you around and introduce you. I'm usually away from the orphanage, securing our funding, but I'll be around from time to time. In my stead, Mrs. Umbridge, the deputy housemother will be in charge." Mumma Minnie fixes him with a piercing look. "Anything you wish to say to me can be said to her."

Harry nods again.

"Now Harry. One other thing before you go." She lets out a little sigh and seems to be casting around for the right words. "I've been told by the doctors that your vocal chords are fine, if a little damaged from the smoke. I just want you to know... take your time. If you feel like you can't speak at the moment, that's ok. And if you need any help, please come to me."

Why is this woman being so kind? Doesn't she know what he did? If she knows about his voice then she's read the report... so why is she being so nice?

He just nods, and tries not to let his emotions play out on his face but his anger is feathered by grief and must bleed out anyway as Mumma Minnie's face softens. His mother always told him he was too expressive.

"Right then Harry, as it's almost dinner you better be off. Abernathy will show you where you'll be sleeping and help you get everything you need. Won't you?" She speaks the last two words loudly, and looks at the door, unimpressed.

It inches open to reveal a shame-faced, thin boy with tousled blond hair and red cheeks. His white shirt is dirty and haphazardly tucked into navy shorts and thick knee high socks.

"Eavesdropping again, Abe?" Mumma Minnie scolds, shaking her head. "I suppose at least I won't have to repeat myself. Be off with you then, boys."

Harry rises, ignores the luminous stare of curiosity foisted on him by Abernathy, and follows the taller boy out of the room. As soon as the door shuts behind him, Abernathy whirls around, chattering excitedly.

"So, Harry is it? I'm Abernathy, as she said, but call me Abe, everyone does. If you've got any questions about our lovely home here just gimme a shout, alright? And yeah, just so you're not left with your hopes up, nobody ever gets adopted from here. I've been here since I was six, like five years ago, and in that time I think one little girl got adopted. But it was all a bit weird to be honest with you, and I don't know if her foster parents were really the right sort, if you get my meaning."

He pauses to suck in a breath and Harry blinks. Abe beams at him and begins to stroll back down the corridor. "Funny that you're a mute though. I've never met one before. How old are

you anyway?

Harry sticks up all his fingers on both hands.

Abe looks impressed and whistles. "Really! Don't take it the wrong way but I pegged you at about seven! I guess we all look a bit young though to be fair. Old Minnie tries her best but it's not like there's a great deal of food to go around and we get more and more kids every year-"

Harry listens with half an ear, too busy scoping out the rooms they walk past. Some of them are locked shut, some of them are tiny and have two dingy mattresses pushed up against the wall. He peers inside another and sees the metal frames of six beds crammed together, shelves running the wall's perimeter stacked to the brim with odd nicknacks. That must be the dorms.

Abe notices his look of morbid curiosity and breaks off from his monologue to laugh. He grabs a thin stick from where it's propped up against the wall and twirls it round before hoisting it up on his shoulder. "Yeah. Stuck in this set up until we're fourteen, annoyingly. You're with me, after Johnnie- uh, after he ran away. It's just down this corridor."

Harry is already struggling to keep up his mental layout of the orphanage. It's surprisingly complicated - it's not the biggest building he's ever seen, but it seems to have dark corridor after dark corridor, and the staircases make no sense. They seem to just pop up out of nowhere, and lead in circles. It doesn't help that the thin winter light dripping through the windows lends a sallow, half-hearted illumination to the place.

All in all, it's terrifying.

He feels his hand drifting to the locket hidden under his top, and he stops himself just in time, shoving it in his pocket where it trembles. He can't draw attention to it in a place like this; he'll keep it on him at all times for now, until he can find somewhere appropriate to hide it.

"Now, I don't think you need any clothes, you can keep your fancy shirt. We'll get you a set of pyjamas though. Might be able to find you a jumper or something, but you can just nick one if you get put on snow shovelling."

It sinks in that his ratty, soot-stained pyjama top is of better quality than most of the other kid's clothes. Yeah, he definitely needs to find somewhere to stash the locket.

"Anyway, here's your bed."

They've arrived at a dorm a similar size to the previous one. This one is arranged a little strangely though: one bed at the foot of the room, next to the window and blocked partially by a shelf. There's an extra throw on it too, and a second pillow. Maybe it's for an older boy? The other five are arranged uniformly, like the others, and Abe leads him to a thin mattress caged in by a metal bed frame. It looks like a hospital bed. There's a thin sheet and a scraggly blanket, and no pillow.

The blonde boy looks weirdly contrite, scratching the back of his head. "Yeah, sorry 'bout that. This bed's been unoccupied for a while, since Johnnie left."

Harry pointedly looks at the nicer bed, the one with the second pillow.

Abe barks out a laugh. "Good luck getting that back from Riddle. Take my advice and leave it. You're better off steering well clear of the likes of him."

Harry's brow furrows in question. Abe seems to be getting pretty good at reading his expressions as the bitter smile drops off his face.

"He's another orphan, couple years older than you. He's only been here for four months but he's already got everyone spooked. Umbridge loves him. Trust me, he's not one to mess with-
"

"Now that's very kind of you to say." The voice cuts across the room, silky-soft and dangerous.

Harry almost gets whiplash from how quickly he turns to look, feels his heart start to pound. He hadn't heard a thing, even though the floor is as creaky as organ pipes.

Beside him, Abe turns white, very quickly, and stares up in solemn fear. Harry gets curious, despite himself. The boy in the doorway doesn't look like much, although Abe certainly is afraid of him. He leans against the doorframe, all curling dark hair, sharp angles and hollow cheeks, but his blue eyes are what has Harry stiffening. They suck in the light, two steady, black holes, and Harry gets the distinct feeling that he's being sized up, like prey.

The breath stays trapped in his lungs as he and Riddle stare at each other, the seconds slipping by. Riddle's mouth begins to quirk as Harry refuses to look away first, and Abe must take it as some kind of sign. He mumbles out an apology and grabs on to Harry's arm, tugging him along. Riddle's smile stretches across his jaw as Harry's forced to blink away, but he just steps to the side, letting them go.

Even as they speed down the corridor, Harry swears he can feel that cold gaze burning through his shoulder blades like a promise.

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Dinner is almost comically akin to how Harry had imagined it. Some kind of watery stew, with horrible sour tomatoes and celery floating in an oily slick of water. He gulps it down regardless: all the comments on his height have struck a bit of a nerve. Besides, he can't taste anything anyway. Just smoke.

They're arranged in funny lines of tables, shoved together like pigs at a trough. The older boys and girls have more food and less wobbly chairs, at the top of the room, and the rest of the children just grab what they can. The noise is deafening: shouting, screaming, slurping.

Harry tunes it out, lets Abe introduce him to the others. There's a quiet girl with a big bush of chestnut hair and teeth a little too big - Hermione - who gives him a sad smile when he nods, and a rather dirty red-head with a face full of freckles, called Ron. He doesn't bother trying to contribute to the conversation, just drains the chipped glass of water and tries not to feel overwhelmed by the wall of noise.

A few minutes later, there's a noticeable dim, and Harry looks up.

The boy from earlier - Riddle - walks through the doors. It's pretty crazy that that in itself is enough to cause a hush, but despite the number of eyes on him he looks perfectly at ease. He walks up to the dinner lady and, to Harry's surprise, gets served what is clearly an older boy portion.

As he walks past Harry, Riddle suddenly stops. Harry can feel the heads swivel, the gazes redirect until they burn a hole in the back of his head. Next to him, Abe, Hermione and Ron have frozen, Ron with his spoon halfway to his mouth. Harry refuses to turn around, remains steadfastly looking down at the table and ignores the prickling in the back of his neck.

He sees what they mean now. Riddle is *wrong*, dangerous. There's some instinct buried away at the back of his mind which tells him to *beware, watch out, stay on alert*.

Riddle seems to be waiting for something, and suddenly Harry's had enough. He won't be cowed into submission by a look - especially not by someone who lords himself over his peers and gets his kicks from being a bully. They're all bloody orphans, Harry thinks with a savage humour, it's a pretty even playing field at this point.

He steels himself, raises his head and deliberately turns in his chair, meeting Riddle's gaze with an raised eyebrow. *Yes?* he sneers inside his head.

There's some strange undercurrent when their eyes meet, some inexplicable intensity in the connection. Riddle looks almost surprised, before his lips turn up at the corners. Harry feels his own expression darken to a hot anger. Why won't he just move on, and leave him alone?

Like a repeat of earlier, Riddle says nothing, just holds his gaze for a beat longer, considering. The room is now so quiet the rattle of the wind through the windows is audible. Just as Harry's body tenses, preparing to get up from his chair, the other boy turns away. He's clearly dismissed from Riddle's attention as he makes his way to the end of the table, where he calmly deposits his tray and takes a seat. The children nearby actively shrink away, and one even gets up to leave.

Slowly, the noise returns to the room, although still not as loud as before.

"What was *that,*" Ron says, soup forgotten, staring at Harry. "He's never done that before."

"Did you listen to anything I said?" Abe hisses quietly. "He's not someone you want to mess with, Harry."

Harry shrugs at them, picking up his spoon and scraping the last vestige of carrot from the bottom, quietly fuming.

Ron shakes his head. "Bloody mental..." he mutters.

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Harry sees nothing of Tom Riddle until bedtime. The orphans all fly back to their room before the clock strikes nine, inspired by the thought of Umbridge's displeasure. Harry understands - his first impression of the acting Housemother is awful. He spends the rest of the time after dinner following Abe around as he chats to people, proudly introducing Harry as the latest recruit, and generally avoiding their dormitory until required. Harry bumps into Umbridge on one of these social circuits, passing her in the corridor as he trails after his new friend, who is locked in conversation with a small boy about a missing rabbit.

"You there. New boy."

It's an unmistakably shrill, feminine voice, and Harry has to hold back the wince; the pitch is somehow at the perfect level to set his teeth on edge. He looks up and blanches - a round, red face is balanced on top of a heap of unnaturally pink tweed, while black beady eyes peer out from under a waxy brown bob. She sees the look on his face and her mouth tightens downwards. Harry has a sinking feeling that he's just made a very poor mistake.

"Yes, you," she snipes, staring down at him. Harry waits patiently for her to continue. "Harry, isn't it? I'm Ms. Umbridge, acting Housemother." She waits a beat for his response, but all he can do is nod his understanding. She definitely knows he can't speak, but seems to enjoy reminding them both.

"Ah yes, you're the mute, aren't you?"

If she *knows* this then why is she bothering to ask the question? Harry nods again in slight irritation.

"Well, I want you to know that there'll be no special treatment for you here, I do none of that nambypambying around. I don't give two hoots if you're deaf, dumb or blind - you work the same hours and you eat the same food."

Harry bites his lip and blinks at her sour tone. What a *horrible* woman.

She huffs at his lack of response.

"Go on then boy, I don't want to see you loitering again, you hear me? I have plenty of ways to make your life more unpleasant that it already is, so no funny tricks. Understood?" Her eyes are cold and smiling, watching him for a reaction.

"At least I won't be having any noise complaints," she adds, chortling. Harry feels his cheeks start to flush, but he keeps his expression placid. Further on ahead, Abe is waiting for him, a look of mild horror swimming onto his face as he realises who Harry has been cornered by.

Umbridge totters past, barking at Abe to tuck in his shirt, and after a mumbled "Yes Ma'am." he scurries over to Harry. They both stare at the retreating blob of pink, disgusted.

"I know. She's awful. You really don't want to get on the wrong side of her."

Harry remembers Abe's words from earlier - that she's somehow under Tom's thumb. He wants to ask how on earth he accomplished that - she doesn't look like she'd fit under anyone's thumb - but as usual the words won't come out.

a death in the snow

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Harry is slightly late getting into bed, having gotten lost on the way back from the bathroom. The room is dark and surprisingly quiet when he slips in, curling up on the bed under the ratty blanket. His back aches from hunching up against the cold, and he thinks longingly about the pillow on Riddle's bed.

Then he remembers: this is what he deserves. So what if his neck aches? He's still alive.

Harry doesn't want to close his eyes. Even though it's pitch black, he's a little afraid to fall asleep, even though the last time he slept was a good few days ago. If he's honest with himself, he's scared of what he'll see. He's managed to avoid thinking about it so far, but his dreams aren't exactly under his control.

He shuffles over to one side, facing the door with his back to the other boys. A bone-deep wariness swims around him, steals it's way across his cold body and starts to sink into his eyelids. He's so tired, both physically and mentally - constant vigilance has eroded his mind away to pretty much just instincts at this point. The low-level panic that's been hitchhiking in his blood ever since he got here has stripped the fight out of him, and Harry can feel his eyes start to creak shut, his breath moving in and out like a tide.

There is no warning. One moment he's lying there, almost asleep, and the next an arm is across his windpipe, a body pressing down on him. Harry chokes, hands flying up to the unknown assailant, scrabbling on the hard mattress as his air supply is cut off. Whoever it is leans close enough that their hair tickles his cheek, and their breath is hot against his ear.

He catches the whisper of a laugh. "Stop struggling," the voice coaxes, and Harry recognises the strangely well-pronounced accent. There's only one other person he's met so far who is free from the cockney twang that slips into the words of the other orphans.

Riddle.

The thought of those sharp white teeth anywhere near his throat makes Harry comply. He locks his limbs, counts to ten in his head. He can hear himself wheezing as he struggles to suck air in and he can see bright spots in the darkness that definitely shouldn't be there.

"There's a good boy," Riddle murmurs softly. The pressure slowly begins to ease, and sweet relief crashes over him as cool oxygen flows once again into his chest.

The dark figure smiles, knobbly knees and sharp elbows still sticking painfully into Harry's side as he crouches over him like some kind of monster from under the bed. Riddle is content to lounge on top of him like Harry is a convenient piece of furniture. He doesn't know what to do. He wishes he could scream, ask the other boy what the fuck he thinks he's doing... but of course he can't.

A click sounds in the quiet of the room, conspicuously quiet. The measured breaths of the other boys have disappeared, and Harry knows they're awake, listening.

Riddle hums out a noise of surprise. "Oh, so it's a locket."

Harry's heart drops. He rips his hand away from where it's pinned by Riddle's knee, fingers scrabbling at his neck where the thin metal of the necklace usually curls. There's nothing; he doesn't need to see the silver glinting in Riddle's hand to know that the other boy has managed to unloop it from around Harry's neck.

He lunges up with a grunt, pushing Riddle off and grabbing for the stolen locket. He actually manages to unseat him, to both of their surprise, and Riddle is forced up on his knees to keep his balance. But as people keep reminding him, Harry is small for his age and although Riddle only has two years on him, he's bigger, heftier despite his lean limbs and orphan-scrawny figure. He has the gall to *laugh* as Harry's hand casts desperately around before he unceremoniously throws out an arm and knocks him back down onto the bed.

It doesn't seem like he tries to push particularly hard, but Harry slams down with such force that the breath is knocked out of his lungs. Riddle leisurely lifts a knee and presses it into Harry's throat. He's pinned, *again,* although at least this time the pressure is lighter and he can pant in shaky breaths.

"Stop that," Riddle comments distractedly, ignoring Harry in favour of studying the photo within, lit poorly with the soft wash of moonlight falling through the window.

"I think I'll take this," he decides, and the sheer fury which blooms up takes Harry aback.

It's not that Riddle has it out for him in particular, in fact, he doesn't think Riddle is really even that interested in him, or his locket. He's doing it because he's *bored*.

Harry's had enough. He grabs the arm holding the necklace and bites down, *hard*. He can feel his teeth punch through skin, the salty taste of blood well up on his tongue. Riddle curses, instantly shifting his weight and pressing down with his knee until Harry's forced to let go, other hand coming round his shoulder to grip the nerve at the base of Harry's neck and shake him like a dog.

"You little beast," Riddle hisses, before his tone becomes one of wonderment. "You made me *bleed."*

Abe's warning about him flashes through Harry's mind, but he can't bring himself to regret what he's done. He just grins, teeth red, and clenches the locket triumphantly in his fist.

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Predictably, after that Harry sleeps poorly. He snatches sleep in fits and bursts, accidentally dozing off before bursting awake, hand clutching the locket and convinced Riddle is standing

over him, ready to tear out his throat.

By the time he's woken by the blue morning light, he feels fuzzy and tired, and there's a strange taste in his mouth. All of the other boys stare at him as they get up to use the freezing cold tap that's designated as the boy's showers, including Riddle. Harry realises why when he follows behind them and catches sight of himself in the mirror. His mouth is smudged brown with flecks of dried blood.

Even Abe won't look him in the eye, afraid to associate with him. He does go as far as to generously corner him as they walk back to the dorms, furtively glancing around before hissing a recrimination.

"What were you *thinking*, Harry? Why didn't you just give it to him?" He seems distraught, shaking his head as Harry sends him a meaningful glare. "It doesn't matter if it was important, you have no idea what you've invited. He's not right Harry, we think, well, we *know,* he killed Billy's rabbit and bloody well put the corpse under his pillow."

But at breakfast - thin, salty porridge which gloops down the back of his throat and is vaguely nausea-inducing - Riddle doesn't seem particularly angry. He does stare at Harry thoughtfully, as he spoons honey onto his food, the golden stream glimmering and twisting as it pools stickily over his bowl. Harry scowls back, notices with some relish that he's wearing a strip of cloth around his arm.

Harry decides he doesn't care. What's Riddle going to do that could possibly make his life worse than it already is? *Come and get me* he thinks tauntingly, making sure Riddle sees his sneer.

The other boy's expression doesn't change, deep, dark eyes unblinking as he licks the back of the spoon.

Ron shakes his head in disgust or fear, Harry can't tell, and even Hermione's face is grave when she looks at him.

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In a beautiful twist of fate, Harry is put on snow shovelling duty, which means he has to clear a path from the front door to the gate. The news of his altercation with Riddle has spread like wildfire, and consequently nobody will talk to him (or at him) and he's unable to find someone to borrow a jumper off - or any kind of weather appropriate clothing.

This leads to him stood outside in air so cold it burns the tips of his ears, accompanied by two big fifteen year old boys who grumble at him to help. They settle into a routine of sorts: the two do the bulk of the shovelling away from the path, and Harry follows behind and pats down the sides of the trench to make sure they don't cave in.

They make good progress in this fashion, and the other boys seem to forget he's even there, a shivering shadow behind them, lips blue. It's odd, he's become so cold that although he can see his white fingers wrapped woodenly around the handle of the shovel, he can't feel it at all. All he can do is grit his teeth and keep patting.

This is how he hears about their plan to kill Tom Riddle.

*

It's stupid, it's undeniably stupid, but he follows them anyway, lips sealed to stop the sound of his chattering teeth from giving him away.

To the envy of all, Riddle has apparently bagged "kitchen duty", where he's responsible for helping the cook wash and carry the big pots and pans that their meals are concocted in.

The boys go quiet as they leave Harry behind to do his final patting, their faces drawn in serious, excited expressions. He pretends to be shuffling back inside when they chance a look back at him, but really he just waits a beat in the shadow of the doorway before slipping back out. Their twin footprints in the snow are easy enough to follow, circling around the back of the building

Even if he hadn't heard them discussing it so loudly earlier, it's pretty obvious what their plan is. They're still clutching the sharp weight of the metal shovels, faces lit up with a kind of scared glee as they inch round the chipped wall to the back kitchen door.

He's pretty sure it's justified. From what he heard, Riddle has been terrorising the orphanage since he got here: pets have turned up dead, food has been mysteriously poisoned, things go missing. Apparently everyone also thinks he's responsible for 'Johnnie's' running away (read: murder), although Harry's not too miffed about that considering he gets a bed because of it.

The two boys are whispering as they settle down behind the bony fingers of a large bush, which camouflages them only in the barest sense of the word. It doesn't matter - it's completely deserted where they are, as nobody willing ventures outside when it's this icy. Harry feels a little twist of apprehension in his stomach. They're big lads, oddly beefy for orphans, coasting through their last year at the orphanage before they're thrown out into the world when they turn sixteen. Both have shaggy, matted black hair, arms padded out even further by the thick wool jumpers stretched over them.

They look mean.

It doesn't take long for Riddle to appear. He's carrying a dull metal pot with both hands, biceps flexing as he manages the weight out the door and into the little courtyard. Harry's strangely pleased that for all his apparent princedom, Riddle is not exempt from having to do chores like the rest of them, even if his job is the nicest. With a heave, Riddle manages to tilt the pot slightly so that a thin stream of boiling water splashes out in a steady pour. It melts

the snow instantly, with a hiss of steam, and Riddle is so intent on making sure it doesn't burn his feet that he misses the movement of his attackers.

Harry's still occupied with the mental to-ing and fro-ing of whether or not he should do something, when the slightly bigger of the two lunges.

With a grunt of exertion he brings the shovel down on Riddle's upper back, hard enough that Harry can actually hear the breath being driven from Riddle's lungs as he falls.

His body crumples to a heap, unnaturally still in the snow. Next to him, the pot starts to roll away, a shiny metal wheel.

Harry starts to hyperventilate. Have they killed him? Has he just- just witnessed a murder? He didn't even have time to do anything, even if he'd wanted to!

"Fuckin 'ell mate," the younger one breathes, making his way over to Riddle's possible corpse and poking it. He glances up at his brother, grinning. "I reckon he needs one more to be sure."

"You what?" The older one frowns, peering closer, before shrugging his thick shoulders and raising his shovel, as if to smash it into Riddle's motionless, pretty head.

Harry doesn't mean to, but his body moves without his permission. All of a sudden he's standing in front of them, catches the look of surprise on their faces, and then the next thing he knows his own shovel is crunching down, right into the older brother's head.

As soon as he hears the noise he knows he's done something terrible. The boy's legs go out, like a puppet with cut strings, and he collapses into an unnatural jumble of limbs.

His brother cries out, yelling something at Harry but it's like he's underwater. He takes a shaky step backwards, doesn't notice when the cold metal handle slips from his hands. All he can see are the bright spots of red, blooming in the dirty snow, a horrifying puddle of colour. He can't tear his eyes away, even as he sees the boy shove towards him, hands outstretched.

I'm going to die, he thinks faintly.

Whatever weird trance he's in is abruptly broken.

From his sprawl on the ground, Riddle suddenly moves. He kicks out at the boy's knees, managing to a land a solid blow. The boy's hefty weight works against him, and he falls over with a yell. Riddle rolls out of the way and staggers up to his feet, face stony with what Harry thinks is pain.

And then quickly - unbelievably quickly - Riddle grabs the fallen weapon and whacks it into the remaining boy's head. He follows the same path as his brother: swoons, hands outstretched, and then slams into the icy grass like his bones have suddenly disappeared. His fingers twitch once before the body goes completely, horrifyingly still.

Harry watches frozenly as Riddle crouches down and begins to tug their limbs into strange positions. Calmly, he prises open one of their hands to slip the handle of the shovel inside. It's

only when the bodies are arranged to his satisfaction that he straightens up and dusts the snow off his palms.

He moves slowly as turns to regard Harry, dark gaze expressionless. For a second, Harry thinks he might be next, can't stop himself from taking a shaky step backwards.

It seems to break whatever spell Riddle's under. He tuts, and crosses the distance between them before Harry can take another one.

"Look at you, you're freezing. Poor thing, let's get you warmed up," Riddle coos, hands coming out to rub up and down his arms. He looks breathless, cheeks flushed, but at this point Harry can't tell if it's from bashing in the head of a young boy or just because of the cold.

Harry remains wordless, although his head feels weirdly light, body numb. He can't help but look again at the body on the floor.

He did that.

"No, no," Riddle demands, gently taking hold of his chin and using it to steer his gaze back to Riddle. Harry feels slightly sick at the pleased smile on his face. "That's not worth looking at. Come on."

He picks up the empty pot, swinging it from one hand, and grabs Harry's frozen hand with the other. For once, Harry is glad he can't speak, doesn't know what he would even say if he could. Instead, he lets himself be tugged back inside the kitchen, listens distantly to Riddle humming something under his breath. The other boy keeps casting delighted glances down at him as he shuts the door softly and places the pot back down on the counter.

The cook is nowhere to be seen, and Riddle seems completely at ease as he walks Harry over to the taps. A burst of freezing water spurts out when Riddle twists the handle, and Harry flinches as his hands are unceremoniously thrust under. The water drips pink into the sink until he's clean again.

"You know, I never thought you'd be so interesting," Riddle says thoughtfully, handing him a rough grey dish towel.

Harry's mind is starting to rush back in now, thawed by the heat of the kitchen. The reality of what just happened hits him, and he feels his eyes grow wet, hands start to tremble. Riddle seems to notice immediately, shushing him, stroking his hair back from his forehead. "Oh Harry. Don't. What you did was perfect."

With surprising tenderness, he guides Harry to a short wooden stool, stripping out of his jumper and handing it over. Harry mechanically accepts it and tugs it over his head. It's warm, and smells surprisingly good. Glancing up at Riddle, he can see that the other boy's shirt has a smudge of reddy-brown on the back, and manages to feel a pang of concern. He'd been hit pretty hard - Harry had heard him cry out, pain genuine.

Riddle sees him looking and smiles. "Don't worry about me, I'll be fine." His eyes flicker towards the door before back to Harry. "I don't know how they could mess up hitting someone with a bloody *shovel*. Good riddance," he sneers, before his head snaps up.

Feline-like, he cocks his head to one side, before his expression suddenly sinks into an eerie calmness. Harry doesn't know why; he strains his ears but there's nothing, just the sound of his own heart, beating what suddenly feels like too loudly in a disturbingly quick staccato. Harry realises then that he can't stop gasping for breath. It feels like no matter how much of the tepid air he swallows, his brain and lungs cry out for more.

Riddle's dark brows furrow, and he crouches down so he's level with Harry. The concern in his eyes is little scary, and even as Harry panics he's trying to work out how on earth Riddle can kill another human without so much as a flinch but look so alarmed at Harry's distress.

"Breathe, little one, breath with me. You have to stop or they'll know. Come on. Listen to my breath," he whispers gently, cupping Harry's face between his large palms and thumbing at the wetness on his eyelashes.

The contact is grounding, and Riddle carefully lifts one of Harry's hands to lie on his chest. Harry feels it rise and fall, warm under his palm. Riddle's breathing is much slower than his, and he tries desperately to match it, *in and out, in and out.* He's just about got it under control when Riddle straightens, quickly stepping in front of him. He grabs a knife and the bucket of potatoes, shoving one into Harry's hands.

The next second, a large, matronly woman bustles through the door, dirty apron stretched over her rotund belly. She's either pregnant or very fat, and her puffy mouth sinks into an irritated frown as she spies Harry.

"Tom," she chastises, putting down the dirty bag of what looks like onions. "Who's this then?"

The switch in Riddle's character is remarkable. The line of his body changes, collapses in on itself, and as he looks up through the tousled gleam of his brown-black hair it's amazing how different he seems. Gone is the haughty air, the quick, sharp eyes, and in its place is a shy little thirteen year old.

"He's the new boy. The mute," Riddle explains softly, casting Harry a quick glance. His eyes are laughing, even though his body language is contrite. "He was lost and I found him in the middle of a fight between the Grubbs brothers. I think they scared him, they were really going at it."

The cook loses some of the flint in her gaze as she takes in Harry's pale face and wet eyes. "Poor chicky," she clucks. "Those boys can be as mean as an old boot when they get a mind to. Always arguing, always fighting."

She wipes the beads of sweat which have been building up on her brow with the back of a dirt-crusted hand. It's warm in the kitchen, especially when coming in from the outside. Harry's own neck feels damp.

"I thought maybe he could help me here, seeing as he doesn't have any other friends," Riddle says cautiously, nodding in his direction. Harry's stares at him blankly, confused, before realising he wants support.

Harry picks up the knife and starts to peel the potato, trying for "pleading" with his eyes. This kind of repetitive, manual task reminds him of home - he'd always sneak downstairs and help with the food. The cook's shrewd eyes cotton on to the ease which which he forms the thin spirals of potato skin, and she thinks for a moment or two.

Tom's face lights up when she nods, sighing. "This once, you hear? This is not a job for two, Tom, and I can't have you bringing random boys down here. What would Ms. Umbridge say if she found out, hm?"

Tom opens his mouth but the cook barks out a laugh. "I know she's soft on you, but she's not *that* soft."

As the cook shuffles around the kitchen, prepping, Tom keeps twitching, fidgeting in his seat. It takes a couple minutes of mindless potato peeling before Harry realises that the turning is to keep his back facing away from the cook, and thus keeping the stain out of sight.

Clever. But he shouldn't have given Harry his jumper.

He'd give it back but it's just so... warm. It's the first time he's been warm in ages, and he flexes his fingers and toes contentedly. The small windows of the kitchen are all wet and foggy from the heat. They're worn and stained like the rest of the orphanage - like the rest of the kitchen. The wooden floor is scuffed and dented and the walls are some kind of dirty orange colour that Harry thinks might have originally been cream. It's small but functional, considering it provides for around a hundred orphans.

Harry stops looking around and focuses on what he's doing with the knife. His brain forms into a kind of rhythm, completely zoned into the task. It lets him work through how he feels, and gives him a bit more of a footing to bury the noise of the *crunch* somewhere deep, deep down, locked up with the memory of screams and fire.

After a while Harry decides he's ok with it. They were going to kill Riddle. And really, what's one more death on his hands?

Chapter End Notes

lol surprise!

belonging

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Surprisingly, they don't find the bodies until after lunch.

Harry has just finished washing up the last of the chipped plates, back in the kitchen, when the cook bursts in accompanied by an unfamiliar small girl. Riddle has disappeared - Harry doesn't know where - conveniently, for the woman walks straight up to him and stares down, hands creeping up to form a mask over her mouth.

"Now, it's not your fault," she whispers shakily, and the girl bursts into loud wails. "But something awful has happened to the Grubbs brothers and you won't be seeing them again."

Harry's heart sinks but he remembers his new resolve and tries to bleach the feeling out of his thoughts.

The cook doesn't say much else, but of course the rumours are *flying* round at dinner. He sits next to Ron and Hermione again, but they rather clearly don't involve him in their whispering. It may have something to do with the thick blue jumper he's now wearing, or maybe it's still left-over caution from his earlier fight with Riddle. It's a bit ironic, Harry thinks, that getting on Riddle's bad side and being in his good graces seem to both elicit the same reaction.

Either way, it's fine with Harry - he doesn't contribute much to a conversation anyway. He sits on the hard wooden bench with his stale bread and lump of cheese, head down but ears pricked up.

"...Are you joking? It's was definitely Riddle, who else would it have been?"

"Well *I* heard that they did it to themselves."

"Don't be stupid, Hermione. They fought a lot for sure, but they weren't dumb enough to do each other in. And anyway, why are they *both* dead then? They can't have hit each other at exactly the same time!"

"Filch said that it looked like one of them froze to death, and that the other died from the blow. They were out there for a while after all..."

"Yeah, I saw from the window on the second floor - their bodies were weirdly stiff and the blood was all frozen and slushy."

Harry feels a surge of partially digested bread threaten to come up as the others make sounds of delighted revulsion. He stops eating and takes a breath, trying to calm the nausea at the horrible picture those words invoked.

Abe interjects. "My money's on Riddle. It's not even a question," he nods decisively.

"Or this one," Ron says, half-laughing, before dropping silent. Harry's pretty sure Ron means him, and waits for someone else to reply... but for some reason they've all gone quiet.

He chances a quick look up.

Ron's face has drained of colour, and he looks like he's swallowed glass, eyes bulging. Harry's confused. For a second he thinks *he* caused the stare, as all of a sudden everyone around him is very pointedly not looking in his direction.

Then a large hand clamps down on his shoulder, thumb rubbing tiny circles into the muscle at the junction of his neck. Harry jumps, twisting to see who it is, although really there's only one person it could be.

"Harry." Riddle's mouth wraps around the word until it's a soft purr, dangerous enough that the rest of the table stiffens, freezing. He smirks. "Come along," he says, voice brokering no argument. There's a strange steel in his eyes that has Harry's mouth suddenly dry.

If he could talk, he would strongly object to being talked at like he's a dog. Instead, he gives Riddle a pointed look, but decides to play along. Riddle seems to be in an oddly blood-thirsty mood, hackles raised. It must be visible to the others as well, as suddenly nobody will look up from their food.

Horribly aware of the stares, he follows Riddle to his throne at the end of the table, where there's a whole loaf of bread, a small bit of ham and a nice segment of cheese. How the hell Riddle has arranged this, Harry has no idea. He can see the bigger boys eyeing him jealously from their table further on, and feels a little shiver of apprehension.

What has he done? The children are quite obviously terrified of Riddle, but Harry's still an unknown. And even worse - a *small* unknown that can't speak, that has no way of telling Riddle if something happens.

Again, the wave of feeling dissipates, as Harry remembers *he doesn't care anymore*.

He takes the seat next to Riddle, who grins at him and pushes the plate towards him. Harry's starving - the growl of his stomach has been a constant companion these last few days - and stuffs a bit of the ham into his mouth. It's salty and delicious, full of flavour especially compared to the soup and porridge that they have most days.

Riddle's eyes are dark with satisfaction as he watches Harry devour the spread. "You're too thin," he says, swallowing his own mouthful of bread, "eat more," and Harry feels something pleased and warm curl in his belly that isn't just the food.

*

Riddle takes an obvious liking to him. In fact, the word 'like' probably doesn't do it justice. Harry has long since come to understand that since that day in the snow, when Riddle washed

the blood off his hands, Harry became *his*.

It's a funny situation he's found himself in, but it seems to be working out. He trails around after Riddle, laughs as he chases after mischief, bares his teeth and snarls at those that try to hurt him (there are a few, but they learn fast).

In return, Riddle takes care of him. Harry gets better and more food. He has his pick of the chores. He gets to take the tattered school books out of the locked classroom after lessons to read through by himself. He walks in the night after the *incident* to see his bed pushed up against Riddle's at the back of the room, a flat vessel for two pillows and a thicker blanket.

(So that's where he'd disappeared to after leaving Harry alone in the kitchen).

Harry hasn't worked out yet what made Riddle the way he is, and it's not exactly like he can ask him about it. He tries to keep an ear out for any rumours or gossip surrounding the older boy, like what happened to his parents, but nobody else seems to know much either. It's a complete enigma, so Harry resolves to keep an eye out for anything he might hear that could serve as a clue.

The only problem is that nobody will risk talking about it in front of him. Harry can empathise, he really can. Even he doesn't *trust* Riddle. The boy smiles so sweetly, always petting him on the head, crooning to him, stroking his arms, his shoulders but--

But then sometimes, when Harry doesn't move quickly enough, he'll give that same smile, fingers following the bone of Harry's arm down to the fragile taper of his wrist until they clamp down, a tight, punishing manacle, and Riddle will tilt his head, watching with satisfaction as Harry trips over numb feet to follow him.

It's the same grip he wakes up to sometimes at night, clawing at it in relief as he resurfaces from memories of a hot orange hell. It'll bruise the next day, but he doesn't care, likes to press his fingers into the marks until it aches, to remind himself that it was just a dream. Riddle never says anything and Harry doesn't know what kind of expression he wears in the pitch-black, but he imagines the other boy staring at him until Harry's exhausted, tear-stained eyes slip shut again and he sinks into the warm bath of a dreamless sleep.

*

Harry is lying on the muddy ground three roads away from the gates of the orphanage with his eyes closed.

It's spring and the sun is freakishly warm as it paints itself all over grey London, managing to make the city look a little less destitute just by way of half-hearted illumination. He flutters open his eyes as he hears more whispering.

Can't you help me, he glares at the upper class ponces that walk past, but all they do is eye him with distaste and speed up

He tunes them out eventually, ears alert for only the shout of a policeman. He hates them. Why do they always pretend like he doesn't exist? He doesn't want to be a ghost, he wants to be a *boy*.

His head is spinning, and his mouth tastes like what he imagines fuel to taste like: bitter, sour, too-warm. He tilts his head back and tries not to throw up, takes another swig from the dark green bottle clutched in his hand. A few drops are all that's left but Harry still greedily licks them off his lips.

The memory of earlier in the day, of Umbridge sneering down at him rears up and he wishes he had some liquor left. What were her words again?

"This is God's punishment for what you did to your parents."

She had no proof that he'd stolen his file from her office, although of course he *had*, but she still hauled him for a caning. The welts Harry didn't mind so much, it was what she said that he couldn't stop hearing echoing around in his head.

"Do you know what you are, Potter? An *abomination*."

Abomination.

The worst part is that she's right. He is. He's a mute freak with no voice.

It's not like he hasn't tried. By this point he's screamed until his face has blown purple, but nothing but disappointed, mocking air seems to whistle out. Hence why he stole his file. He looked at the write-up that the doctor gave Mumma Minnie, eyes frantically scanning the almost illegible blue scribble. There's nothing physically wrong with his vocal chords, it had said. Just a 'psychological defect' caused by the trauma.

And being forced to stand there and listen to that disgusting blob of a human-being tell him that he was unnatural, wrong, *responsible*... the frustration had mounted until it felt like it was curling into every finger, his whole body thrumming with agitated tension until he'd just - cracked.

Fuming, he'd snuck through the gates and walked aimlessly until he spotted the old man passed out in the street. The urge to do it welled up out of nowhere, the thought that it might fix him buried deep within the impotent rage he felt. The bottle had been easy enough to swipe out of the man's muddy hand. He could have had any number of diseases, looked like he probably did, but Harry had found himself an alley and forced the whole sharp liquid down his stupid, faulty throat.

He swallows, mouth thick, and tries to breathe through the dizziness. Why do people enjoy this? He needs to throw up.

His eyes are still closed, and his body twitches. Has he been sleeping? Or did he pass out? He doesn't know, but all of a sudden the sickness doubles, and he manages to throw his head to one side before it all comes back up.

Liquid splatters on the cobblestones as his body tries to expel the alcohol. He groans, clutching at his stomach as tears sneak out the corners of his eyes. His mouth is sour with bile so he spits again weakly. Is he dying? Maybe he's allergic to alcohol and he never knew? Against his back, the brick is cold and uncomfortable, but it's all he can do to sag against it. His eyes are fluttering again and he thinks maybe he can just slip into a nice dark sleep and never wake up...

"Harry."

He recognises the voice enough to make a valiant effort of blinking. The image lazily comes into focus, still fuzzy around the edges. If Harry had the energy he'd probably flinch. Riddle looks furious, eyebrows furrowed and eyes black with rage.

"What have you done?" A cold hand darts forward to grip his jaw, turning it as Riddle inspects his face. Harry probably looks a mess, but he can't find it in himself to care.

Nothing, he tries, but the word doesn't come out.

Riddle ignores him in any case, casting around before he spies the bottle. He reaches over Harry to pick it up, until all Harry can see is his shoulder, black fabric obscuring his view. Riddle holds the bottle up to the sputtering street light to read the label.

"Harry," he says slowly, "why have you been drinking *whiskey?*"

Harry rolls his eyes. Everything is soft, the sun, his body, Riddle's wide palm where it's lying on his neck. He feels like he's dreaming.

The pressure increases slightly, enough to hurt his sore windpipe. "How much?"

Harry just lets his smile act as a question, eyes creasing. Now that he's thrown up and Riddle's here, life seems a lot better.

"How much, hm?" Riddle grits out, peering down the alley. "How much did you drink?"

The shadows are lengthening, hugging the walls, and Harry realises he must have been here a while as it's definitely slipping into evening. He lets his hand flop to halfway down the bottle.

Riddle swears, and all of a sudden the world moves as he reaches under Harry's arms and pulls him to his feet. Harry stumbles, knocking his shoulder against the brick and can't help the little yelp of pain that he lets out as his bruises throb at the contact.

Riddle's hands are there immediately, steadying him, and he doesn't hesitate to pull up Harry's shirt, silent as his eyes run over the red lines on his sides. Riddle's silence is worse than his snide remarks, Harry knows this at least from the last few months.

He angrily jerks away from the cold touch, shoving down his top with clumsy fingers. Riddle says nothing, still staring at the where the bruises lie under his shirt. His fists clench slowly, and Harry heaves out a sigh, eyes closing.

I want to go home, he thinks, body swaying just from the effort of staying still. It's almost comical, and Harry gives in to the urge to laugh without a second thought, giggling as he leans closer to Riddle.

Riddle's long arms wrap around him then, and Harry takes a moment to bury his face into the soft skin of his neck, rubbing his cheek into the warmth. It smells familiar, spicy and sweet.

Riddle mutters something and then they're moving, staggering the short distance back to the main street like some clumsy, four-legged creature. If they get any strange looks, Harry doesn't care, is too busy focusing on staying upright.

Quite how they manage to get back into his room, Harry doesn't remember, but the stairs to the boy's dorm sap whatever dregs of energy he has.

"Out," Riddle bites out to the other boys, and the two smaller children sitting on one of the beds instantly leap up to exit the room. Harry's not too gone to miss the disgusted glances they level in his direction.

He doesn't care; the sight of his mattress trumps any shame he might feel. He walks straight into it, flopping down and curling up. The room is glowing orange from the tiny window high up, and the sound of the street outside is as soothing as any lullaby.

Time drifts; he drifts, somewhere caught between sleep and waking.

And then there's a weight on him.

He panics, movements thick and clumsy but he already knows it's useless.

"It's your own fault," Riddle whispers in his ear, "let it happen." His knees dig painfully into Harry's arms, pressing them tightly against his own body.

Harry is both confused and scared, but even in his half-asleep half-drunk state he knows obeying won't end well for him. The other boy is only half visible from where Harry's view is obscured by the pillow, but the width of his smile is chilling.

So he thrashes on his belly, whips his legs around like a fish out of water.

Little good it does him.

"Suit yourself," the older boy mocks, and then a line of pain drags it's way down Harry's shoulder.

It feels like fire, like a *bite*, but Riddle's mouth is nowhere near him! He cries out as shock carves a hole in his stomach--what is he *doing*?--but the flash of silver near his neck has him freezing immediately.

He whimpers instead, too afraid now to buck up and unseat Riddle as his skin parts in another cut. All he can do is bury his face in the pillow to muffle his screams as he waits for Riddle to finish whatever act of retribution he's concocted.

By the time he's done, Harry has cried himself tired and the only thing to escape him a few exhausted hiccups. It's not over yet though; a bright splash of something wet and burning is glugged onto his back.

He shrieks. It's whiskey, he knows it is, he can smell it.

Riddle shushes him, carding a hand through his hair as Harry shakes. "You did so well," he whispers, and to Harry's alarm, presses his lips against the hurt. He feels a tongue, and the strange sick feeling comes rushing back in. "It's ok, you're ok now."

No I'm not! he wants to yell, but it's too much. He's drunk and poisoned and full of unspent adrenaline, and--

And Riddle's palms feel so soothing as they run up and down his back, trace the marks left by the cane. Over and over again, the same path, until Harry's blurry eyes are somehow closing, his mind unmooring.

His shoulder hurts, a constant terrible throb, and he's all to eager to escape.

Maybe he's already asleep, maybe it's a just a dream, but he thinks Riddle speaks then.

"Only me," he might have said, "do you understand?"

And Harry doesn't, not until he hears the whisper, "only I'm allowed to hurt you."

*

It takes Harry all of one day to retaliate. He wastes no time the next day getting himself alone in front of a mirror and peering at Riddle's handiwork. His mouth falls open, incredulous as he examines the scarred skin.

'*TR*' cuts through the pale skin of his shoulder, the letters angular but remarkably neat considering that Harry was thrashing around for most of it.

Riddle has *signed* him, like a painting. The letters are dark red, inflamed and swollen, so tender that it will definitely throb for another straight week. It's probably what he wanted, Harry thinks, a lasting reminder of his punishment. No matter how many times he dunks his shirt into the sink, scrubbing with the hard block of grey soap, the brown stain on the shoulder of his top doesn't budge.

He lets the anger build and build until it aches, a spitting, sour ball in his chest. He lets the rage fill him up, push out the nerves he feels as takes the penknife from where he know

Riddle hides it, under their bed, slips it into the sleeve of his pyjama top and bids Riddle a sulky, silent good night.

He stokes the fire, higher and higher, keeping himself awake, alert, watchful even as Riddle's breaths even out and his face slips into one of a thirteen year old boy again. Harry bites his tongue as he makes the first cut, the line of the 'H' dragging down, blood welling up even before he finishes it. Riddle startles into waking immediately, twisting so that the horizontal line in the middle of the H is made without Harry even trying, a diagonal scratch upwards.

The older boy hisses with pain, fingers digging into Harry's wrist so hard he almost drop the knife. Harry bares his teeth in a snarl, eyes flashing in the darkness. He can either do it all now or wait for Riddle to sleep again, maybe the next night, maybe the night after. But he *will* finish it.

The conviction must be evident in his face, as Riddle relaxes down into the bed, sticking out his neck to give Harry more room to work. The soft, quiet breaths of the other boys are continuing, a peaceful tide for the blood seeping into the sheets, a sticky red drip down the white of his back. In the moonlight, the mark Harry's made looks black, and he can't help but wonder if he's carved too deep, if the flash of white is bone or just the reflection of the light.

He must have paused for too long, as Riddle turns his face to look at Harry.

"Finish it then," he says slowly, a challenge in his eyes.

Harry laughs--decides to free the thing that prowls, bloody, caged in his chest--and cuts.

Chapter End Notes

thank you so much for getting this to almost 300 kudos (wtf!)

for anyone that's read any of my other stuff... i'm really enjoying writing this one, so my other fics are probably going to take a backseat for a while.

also just to let you know, it's probably going to get quite dark (if you couldn't tell already lol)

burn out that heart

Harry wakes up to sallow London light. It's dirty, struggling to fight it's way through the grit of their grubby little window, and the few beams that make it paint themselves exhaustedly on the floor. Next to him Tom sleeps. It's still early, maybe five or six o'clock. The orphanage is strangely, eerily quiet at this time, before the younger children are awake.

Their room is already stuffy with summer heat, the gap in the window not enough to let any semblance of a breeze through. His back is sticky against the coarse sheet. Tom's legs are entangled with his, and Harry shifts a little to stare at him.

At seventeen, he's gorgeous. He has everyone he meets wrapped around his quick, clever fingers - Harry has to pull him down the streets now when they walk through the prostitution lanes. Harry's pretty sure the girls are teasing, but it still annoys him when they giggle and slip down their already revealing lingerie, winking. Tom loves the attention, laps up Harry's scowl and preens under it.

Right now his eyelashes are casting a deep purple shadow on the crescent of his eyes, cheekbones sloping sharply down to meet an angular jaw. His dark brows are perfectly relaxed, and he looks younger like this, softer somehow.

Slowly, he runs the tip of a finger lightly across the naked skin of Tom's shoulder, marvelling at the smooth texture, the way a trail of goosebumps follow. He gives in to the urge to trace the two white raised letters, terribly written but still standing out. To Harry's irritation, Tom had shot up like a beanpole last year, his shoulders stretching out to a strong, broad chest, and he can see it in the way the scars have stretched slightly, pulled over the muscle.

"Admiring your handiwork?"

Harry's hand freezes, and he looks down. Tom's eyes are open, regarding him with curiosity and amusement. Harry nods and smiles unashamedly, watching as the corners of Tom's mouth lilt up too.

"Your handwriting is atrocious," Tom yawns, stretching a little. His arms crack as he pushes them above his head. Harry snorts, turning a little to show his own scar pointedly; Tom's own handwriting is not much better.

Tom reaches out and presses a fingertip to it, watching the white thumb mark fade as the blood rushes back in. It makes Harry shiver slightly, go a little hot. He still remembers Tom pushing his bloodied fingers inside Harry's mouth afterwards so he could taste what he'd done.

Tom rolls over onto Harry, disrupting the memory, and presses a soft little bite to his jaw. "As tempting as you are, I have to be off," he murmurs.

They listen to the noise of the street start to filter in, shouts, the clatter of hooves, and Harry nods, reaching out to pull him closer. Huffing out a laugh, Tom slides his palm down Harry's

chest, to his stomach, applying the faintest pressure as if to hold him still. Tom's mouth moves from his neck to his lips, smiling as he presses a kiss into the soft weight of Harry's bottom lip. Their room seems slightly brighter, although he's not entirely sure it's because of the awakening sun.

"Be good today," Tom teases, rolling out of bed. "Don't traumatise too many orphans, will you?"

Harry grins devilishly, and watches him pull on the thin trousers and shirt. It never ceases to amaze him that the boy who he wakes up with is the same one who's name is enough to make a room go quiet, and who people are afraid to look in the eye.

Tom looks excited about something today. There's a curl of anticipation to his gaze, a subtle energy thrumming through the way he holds himself. Harry lazily wonders if it's because he plans to kill someone.

*

It's far worse. He does kill someone, but it's because there's a bust. To make it even more complicated, the man he stabs is a *police officer*.

Harry only knows because he's outside reading an old Roald Dahl book, when a dirty street urchin nearly barrels into him with how hastily he's running. He must have been given a good description of Harry because his brown eyes grow wide and he pants out the message straight away.

The normally precious book is left discarded on the ground as Harry follows the child through the heavy iron gates of the orphanage, out onto the street. They dodge the bustle of people, adrenaline letting Harry, for the first time in his life, easily keep up with the twists and turns down alleyways that the kid dances down.

The police station is an intimidating squat concrete block, with two uniformed men hulking outside. The little boy ignores them, runs Harry around the back where there's a side door. They slip in together, and once again Harry is directed down backdoor corridors until he reaches the cells. If he wasn't so nail-bitingly anxious, he'd probably be impressed with how easily this kid can navigate the city, but as it is Harry forgets to even thank him.

Tom is inside a cell with a few other men, nose leaking black blood and teeth bared. He stops pacing as soon as he catches sight of Harry, fingers instantly coming up to clench white-fisted at the bars.

He start talking immediately, dark eyes flitting to the dim hallway where Harry presses desperately against the iron separating them. "I don't know how much time I have," he says, and Harry's never seen him look so pale. "I'm being called up, love. I killed one of their men - the only reason I don't have a bullet lodged in my brain right now is because they have a

quota of degenerates to fill." Tom quite visibly swallows his anger, licks the sticky blood from his lips. "I've got a few months of training in Hampshire then realistically I'm probably looking at North Africa."

Harry shakes his head in wordless denial. Tom runs a hand through uncharacteristically messy hair, gazing sharply at Harry as if trying to memorise everything about him. A clanging sounds from further down, and the men in Tom's cell spring to their feet nervously, muttering.

"We've got to go guv." The kid that bought him here shifts uneasily and spits the words into the shadows.

Uncaring of who sees, Harry grabs Tom's fingers, squeezing them with bruising tightness. He doesn't even feel when they're squeezed harder in return but later he'll see the red crescent imprints of nails that aren't his.

He's seventeen, is the only thing he can think, he's only fucking *seventeen*.

The boy tugs worriedly on his arm, looking pleadingly to Tom. Harry, who has the sense that his world is falling apart, makes a split-second decision and grabs his locket, ripping it off his neck and shoving it through the bars at Tom. The older boy takes it gently, closing his fist around it like a lifeline. He looms as close as he can, waves of dark, bitter frustration pouring off him.

"I'll find my way back to you, little one. I promise," he says viciously, eyes boring into Harry's.

He doesn't doubt it.

Tom gives the kid a nod, without breaking eye contact with Harry. Small hands fasten themselves around his wrist like a manacle and the boy tugs him away with surprising strength. Harry can hear voices growing nearer, lets his feet follow each other down the corridor, and watches as Tom's face grows smaller, eyes fixed hungrily on Harry as he edges away.

And then, all of a sudden, he's back outside, blinking at the light and wishing his eyes would stop watering at the brightness.

*

Of course, one year later Harry enlists.

He's excruciatingly, *obviously* underage. The balding doctor who does his medical sits behind a shabby desk with his wrinkled fingers steepled for a good few minutes as he wrestles with some internal decision. Eventually, just as Harry's about to get up to leave and denounce this

plan as failed, the man sighs wearily, looks at him with something like pity in his dull blue eyes and signs the forms.

Harry can't stop the triumphant smile from spreading across his face as he skips out of the hospital. He can't quite believe it's that easy; things at the front must be worse than the papers say they are. He doesn't even bother going back to the orphanage. He already has everything he needs in his backpack, and besides, he's eager to escape the explosive rain dropping over a smoking London as quickly as he can. They need the space too: the dorms are now crammed, filled to the brim with dead-eyed children who don't even cry anymore.

The next day, Harry lets himself be jostled around as he steps onto the crowded train, full of eager young men, all ambitious to die for their country.

The three hour train journey passes in a blink of green and gold. Harry hasn't travelled outside of London for years by this point, and he can't look away from the blur of hills and fields which sprint past. He sees a patch of tiny, ant-like cows low down in the distance, big, beautiful oak trees with fiery coloured autumn leaves, little streams and the occasional blackened husk of a house. Despite the chill in the air and the loud noise of the engine, he keeps the window wide open so he can taste the country breeze. It's so different from London's smoggy metal machinery, sweet and clear, and with each breath he feels like his lungs thank him.

It's over far too soon. They reach the army base and he's promptly thrust into the grim reality of a nation in the grips of the worst war the world has ever seen.

It's intimidatingly organised chaos as soon as they are waved through the gates. There must be a thousand other new recruits, and Harry already feels like a wayward sheep. He follows the directions that are shouted at them as best he can, picking up the uniform, boots, other bits and pieces and signing in.

They're directed down a long corridor in the ugly, concrete barracks (utilitarian and painted a strange eggshell blue on the inside) before a few men, including Harry, break off out of the pack of agitated newcomers at dorm 22.

Harry shares the large, domed room with 27 others, most of which seem to have arrived before him. It's strangely similar to the dormitories at the orphanage, and so Harry is pretty nonplussed about the lack of privacy. The only bed left is at the back of the room, on the top bunk. The man underneath doesn't seem that interested in him, just grunts out a greeting and continues pulling on his bedsheets. He's thickset, incredibly tall with olive skin and brown hair. Harry doesn't know his name.

They have five minutes here, before a young man walks through the door and screams at them to form a line and follow him. Harry joins the back, trying to take everything in and learn quickly.

Half an hour later sees him gritting his teeth as tufts of black hair waft to the floor. They join the carpet of of blonde, brown, black and even red; nobody has bothered to sweep. It makes him feel a bit sick. He has no idea what he looks like, there's no mirror, but his head feels odd and cold, and he has to stop himself from reaching up and running a hand across his scalp.

He looks around at the rest. Something about the shaved scalps makes the men suddenly appear older and meaner, and as he waits for the rest of his platoon to be done he quickly realises that he's definitely the youngest.

They're marched back to the room, where they're told to strip, put on the uniform and form a line again. Harry wiggles out of his clothes, ignoring his comparatively scrawny body (especially compared to his bunk-mate, who is *huge*), and looks down at his old, tatty clothes left crumpled on the floor. Suddenly they don't look like his anymore. They don't fit in with this shorn, tired-looking boy who for all intents and purposes is now eighteen, not newly sixteen.

Everyone shifts uneasily in the quiet as reality gradually sinks in. Looking around, they've suddenly shifted from civilian to soldier in the space of an hour, and everyone is still struggling with the cataclysmic switch in identity, and trying not to look as nervous as they undoubtedly feel.

The young man who has been leading them around nods at them and snaps to attention as a big burly man in his forties stalks through the door. His short black hair is shot through with grey, and his eyes are light coloured but piercing as they instantly settle on Harry. Probably because his height causes a notable dip in the line.

"For fuck's sake, I told them to stop bringing me children," he mutters audibly as he walks past. A couple of recruits huff out a quiet laugh but most are too nervous to open their mouths.

Harry narrows his eyes, although he can't be too annoyed - after all, he is underage. He'd better be careful. He's talked to a few veterans before about what to expect and the advice he got was pretty much all the same: keep your head down, don't draw attention to yourself, work hard and just do what you're told.

"Right," the older man booms out, apparently satisfied with his visual inspection. "My name is Sergeant Dawes, and I am now your lord, master and fucking commander, understood?"

They all mutter out a "yessir" and Dawes' eyes light up. Harry begins to suspect that later on he'll have them screaming that word.

"Now boys, you've just taken the first step to becoming a member of the world's most glorious fighting force. This means I have eight weeks to form you into the kind of men his Majesty would be proud of - he wants *killing machines,* not pathetic scrawny bastards like yourselves."

Dawes fixes them each with a glare as he patrols up and down. Harry knows that this is necessary, all part of the act, but he can't stop himself from disliking the older man. His constant shouting is very unpleasant.

"This," he says, and gestures around with a pointed finger, "is not going to be a fucking walk in the park. It's going be *tough*. You'll hate it - you'll cry, you'll break, you may even try to leave. But I've been given an order to keep you here and pummel you into the shape of a god-

fearing, german-killing country-loving member of Great Britain's armed forces. And that I will do."

Harry maintains a straight face but inwardly he's rolling his eyes. This whole bootcamp is not just to teach them practical skills and how to kill their enemies. It's about discipline - cracking open the hard shell of what they think they know about themselves and teaching them that they don't know shit.

A part of him wishes he could just shut his eyes and wake up in North Africa, but the thought that keeps him on his feet is that Tom would have gone through this too. Harry can imagine him standing here, beautiful face illuminated by the shaved head, expression placid but eyes dark and glinting with the promise of something terrible. Harry wouldn't be surprised if whoever got on the wrong side of him ended up never leaving basic training.

He clenches a fist, takes sip of air and breathes it out slowly as Dawes continues his tirade.

That's who he'll be, he thinks determinedly. He'll be Tom.

fight

Predictably, basic training is hell.

Each long, exhausting day begins with an orchestra of standard issue alarm clocks bursting out into a collaborative shrill wail when their collective hands hit five. Harry jolts into waking, rolls himself out of bed, and joins the rest of the grumbling recruits to clean their dorms for an hour, until the linoleum floors gleam a blinding pale green. They then fumble their way into their exercise clothes and line up nervously for room inspection, Dawes' favourite time of the day. Harry has to hand it to him, he's never as creative with his insults as he is during that terrible daily ritual. He's never really resorted to physical violence - he doesn't need to. With an order, he can have a recruit doing press-ups until they throw up or pass out.

After cleaning, they train. This is almost always in some extended, cost-effective form of basic physical exercise, and can be anything from completing timed obstacle courses, to running for hours, weighed down with full standard equipment, as well as the usual squats, press-ups, lunges etc.

Harry is usually in so much pain by the end of the day that if he wasn't so exhausted, he's sure he wouldn't be able to sleep for the sheer full-body *ache*. His feet are the worst; it takes a while to wear the standard-issue leather boots in, and having to run with sweaty, blistered-raw feet is agony until he loses the feeling in his toes and heels.

They learn how to handle different weapons, the best way to throw a grenade and dig a trench. They practise getting their gas masks on midway through the night, woken up by Dawes screaming '*Gas! Gas! Gas!*'. They're taught a few basic words in german, russian and italian, learn to tell the fighter jets and bomber planes by sound. Harry knows exactly how far he can push himself before the world spins and goes black.

It's fucking awful, but he's comforted by the singular thought that if Tom did it, so can Harry.

*

Harry encounters a slight hindrance to his plan annoyingly early on.

He forces his body to struggle through the exercise, picks himself back up and keeps going even when he finishes last and when the other recruits jeer at him for shaking through the last pull-ups. Luckily it's early enough on that everyone is still figuring out the boundaries, and nobody is willing too push them too far. Harry knows how this goes though: he grew up in an environment where it was every child for themselves. You had to fight for your food, for your bed and for your place in the pecking order, and he knows that in a couple of weeks the

nervousness will have worn off and people will start to test him. He makes for a good target: he's young, scrawny and a fucking *mute* for god's sake. It's an invitation.

So it surprises him when he fails at something that isn't the physical part. Harry is usually one of the quickest when it comes to their lessons in 'warfare' and the *extremely* shallow basics they get on strategy and military tactics.

On this particular morning, a week in, they trudge over to a concrete square that seems half-heartedly tacked on to a bit of the shooting range. There are stained concrete blocks (that Harry assumes are seats) arranged in a rough semi-circle. Weeds fight for a breath, peeking out of the slabs on the floor and lending the surroundings a nice derelict feel. They're out of breath; it's early, six am, and they sprinted the whole way here.

As Harry takes a seat in the corner he lets the quiet banter of a few of the men wash over him; it's quite relaxing, hearing them rib each other about snoring or mock someone's Irish accent or chat about life back at home. In fact, the day is incongruously nice, a cloudless pale blue sky with the taste of smoke singeing the cool air.

His opinion changes when he realises what they're here to do. It's a simple task: learn to strip the gun apart and put it back together before the stopwatch goes off.

Simple, right?

Harry takes ten minutes longer than every single other man in his unit to take his rifle apart and put it back together.

Ten minutes doesn't sound a lot, but feeling twenty pairs of eyes rest heavily on him as his fingers struggle to find the catches, he begins to feel the first stirrings of dull worry peek out. Harry isn't one for feeling regret, as useless an emotion as it is, but he can't help but think if now had really been the right time for him to have enlisted. Should he have waited another year, until he was seventeen?

He shuts the question down instantly. No. Tom may not have another year.

Someone pipes up from the back as he's hand slips down the barrel of the rifle, something stupid and petty about how he just needs to rub the shaft a bit more and he's welcome to practise on him. It's a pretty poor innuendo, but Harry glares at them so viciously that they promptly shut up.

The feeling only grows as their lessons swings on. It's only an hour, and after that is another run, but no matter how many times he tries or what he does, his fingers fumble over the small catches and he can't keep the sequence straight in his head. Harry is not used to being slow at anything, and he feels his cheeks burn. He's not embarrassed, more frustrated. Why can't he get it? Even the thickest of the bunch - Bisker, undoubtedly - can do it within the allotted time.

The other men forget about it as the tasks of the day consume them, and he can't exactly rise to the bait. There's no point in teasing him as he never gives them a response. Even Dawes

just eyes him appraisingly when the man next to Harry sighs and shows him how to do it again.

Harry hates people thinking he's stupid. Hates it to the point that he purposefully stays awake for an hour after lights out, waiting for the sounds of snoring and shifting bodies to fill the room. It's a struggle - sleep calls to him, croons to him in a blissfully numb siren song. It's normally the only time in the day that he lets himself think about Tom, and how Harry's face fits in the soft hollow his collarbones, the way he smelt like home, how he would smile so seductively with sharp, dangerous teeth.

Not tonight though. Harry creeps down the thin metal ladder, ever so quietly and ever so slowly, picking his way through the floor and ignoring the looming pillars of the beds. He's used to sneaking out of shared rooms; he and Tom used to raid the kitchen at night and pick the lock on the fridge door.

He goes to the nearest rifle storage room - they're unloaded, of course, which is why they're worryingly easy to find - and grabs the nearest one. Grimly, he sits down with his back against the cheap plastered wall and mechanically starts taking it apart.

*

The next day he walks around feeling like he's dreaming. With the amount of exercise they're doing, he needs the scant amount of sleep allotted to recover. But it had taken him an embarrassing amount of time to take the damn thing apart the previous night, and then a further half an hour of fumbling around to put it back together again.

So the next night he does it again.

He's slightly mollified when the whole process only takes him thirty minutes in total, this time, and he's starting to remember the order.

The next night, he slashes the time down to ten minutes - slightly below average, but certainly nowhere near as bad as he'd been to begin with.

When he goes to sneak out for the fourth night in a row, he's just tiptoed into his usual practise room when someone yanks on his arm and pulls him to the side. If Harry wasn't a mute he would have woken the whole damn barracks up with how startled he is. Whirling around, he's just about to swing a punch when he realises who it is.

It's his bunkmate: Lewis.

Like Harry, Lewis is in his khaki army vest, stretched tight over his tree-trunk of a chest, and loose sleep shorts. He cracks out a yawn. "So this is where you're going every night then Potter," he says quietly, peering round Harry at the rows of weapons. "Huh."

Shit. Harry wants to slap himself. Why did he think he could climb down a bloody ladder and not wake the man at the bottom? He doesn't know what to do - Lewis doesn't strike him as particularly hostile, but the bloke's a giant, in his thirties, thick corded muscle on every inch of him. He could squash Harry like a fly with one finger.

"You going to tell me what you're doing here, or should I go and fetch Dawes?"

Harry realises what this looks like and scrabbles to mime an emphatic no. Desperately, he grabs a gun, shaking his head when Lewis loses the sleepy demeanour and backs away slightly, on edge.

Harry crouches to his feet on the floor and as quickly as he possibly can dismantles the thing and puts it back together. It takes him three minutes and he's sweating by the end.

He chances a glance upwards and freezes. Lewis is looking at him with a huge, shit-eating grin on his face, and he chuckles as he starts to clap.

"Well I never, Potter," he says, surprised, looking at the gun before taking it out of Harry's hand and examining it. He handles it like someone who's held a gun their whole life, not someone who learnt in the last week. It peaks Harry's curiosity - he wonders what Lewis was when he was a civilian. Maybe some kind of police officer? Or gang member?

Harry can't quite believe it happens but right then and there he yawns. It slips out unbidden whilst he stares at the other man, and he instantly clamps his mouth shut on it but it's too late.

To his shock, Lewis just huffs out an amused laugh, eyes crinkling. He puts the gun down with the others and points at the door. "I'd say you've done enough now lad. Go and get some sleep."

Harry nods, chancing a smile of his own. Lewis strikes him as tough but fair - a good person, if a little quiet.

He clicks his tongue as Harry shuffles past him, looking down at the ground. "Ah but you remind me of my son. He's about your age - what, fifteen? Sixteen?"

Harry shakes his head and flashes all his fingers and then eight more. It's a blatant lie and Lewis has no qualms in calling it out.

"Course you are. And I'm the King of England," he says sarcastically, thick eyebrows raised.

Harry just smiles.

*

The men know him as a mute, and so far he's gotten surprisingly little shit from the drill sergeant for it. Maybe because they all know he's too young to be here, even if nobody says

so. Maybe they're just worried about the war, and the grim reality that in less than two months they'll be going off to fight nazis, woefully unprepared. Much to his bitterness though, Harry *is* the weakest. This doesn't really pose that much of a problem, until they reach month four and he realises that Dawes' has somehow been holding back on them on how he can possibly make Harry's life even worse.

It starts on a Monday morning, when Dawes has them line up outside in their underwear at four am. The sergeant looks particularly gleeful today, and Harry feels dread form a hard, unswallowable ball in his throat as he stands there shivering and confused.

"Well then, recruits. I'm sure you're wondering why you're queuing out here in the arse-biting cold instead of tucked up nice and warm in your beds getting your precious beauty sleep." He hacks out a laugh and peers pointedly round at one of the recruits who has a cauliflower nose and thickset brow. "God knows Bisker here needs it."

To his credit, Bisker's face remains blank.

"This week we're going to form you lot into a proper unit. Now you're probably thinking 'what the hell do you mean Sergeant Dawes, sir?'." His eyes are sparkling and it might be Harry's imagination but he seems to lock eyes with Harry."From now on, your individual performance doesn't count for shit. It's all about your work as a team. This means that when I ask you to do something... I won't stop the timer until every man in your team has completed it. You wake up together, you eat together, you shit together and you sleep together. And any punishment one of you incurs now has to be shared between all of you."

Harry shifts on his feet and tries not to let his expression show, even though he can feel the collective attention of his platoon drift towards him. They're probably thinking exactly the same thing he is.

He's completely fucked.

*

It comes to a head three nail-biting days later. Their activity for the day is going out on a tab - effectively, a long, exhausting walk laden down with their entire kit, up and down hills before they make camp near a river. Although it's early October, the weather is unseasonably nice, but what appears to be a stroke of good luck very quickly turns into a curse.

Five hours in and Harry's gasping for breath, eyes stinging with the sweat dripping into them. He's boiling hot, the sun beating down a constant white glare, but they're not allowed to take off their uniform jackets. The other recruits have stopped talking a while ago as they began the ascent, and all Harry can do is put one foot in front of the other and repeat. He's at the back of the line of men, determined not to lag behind, eyes fixed on Lewis who walks a while ahead of him.

Spitting into the bushes, Harry unscrews the cap of his water bottle, taking a short swig from the warm, metallic tasting liquid when he suddenly feels his knees buckle. For a second there's confusing bright light, and then he comes to on the floor, the taste of grainy dirt on his tongue. It takes a few seconds to realise he had passed out, and he gives himself a self-indulgent moment to curse his age. Most of the men are in their twenties, lean and slowly getting to prime physical condition. Harry is still growing, not used to physical labour. He's not unfit, but he's weedy and pale, even if he's put on a nice amount of muscle in the last few months.

He coughs out the taste, and pushes himself up to his knees. To his dismay, the line has halted, and he can see the last quarter of the group staring back at him with irritation. Dawes looks delighted, is making his way down to where Harry struggles to his feet, scowling. He already knows what's coming.

"What's this then Potter? Fancied a little nap did you?" he sneers, crossing his arms.

The bastard isn't even breathing heavily.

"Well lads, if Potter's feeling tired, how's about we wake him up a bit?"

There is a distinct murderous air now emanating from Harry's unit and he swallows, swaying on his feet and praying to any god that's out there that he doesn't faint again.

"I want 100 jumping jacks from each of you. Oh no, not you Potter." Dawes laughs at Harry's look of incredulity. "No, you rest. Let your team lend you a hand," he says in mock concern, gesturing at Harry to sit down on the side of the bushy path. "You don't mind, do you boys?"

Harry stares up as the whole line of men curse and spit at the ground before heaving into the exercise. It sounds comically easy but the reality is vastly different; jumping up and down in full uniform with their tents, equipment and rifles on them is no quick task. Most have nearly run out of water, and this is delaying their time to reach the next stretch of stream.

He's forced to watch as a few of the men have to pause to blink away dizziness, some of them muttering under their breath. He hears at least three '*fuck you Potter*'s before the final man finishes, sucking in harried breaths and tottering on his feet, and they can continue on. There'll be consequences for this, but for now Harry just tries to stay upright and on the move. Lewis casts a concerned glance back at him but says nothing.

*

Rain is slashing down at the thin film of his tiny one-man tent like it's Armageddon. Occasionally a crumple of lightning will flash, throwing everything into black and white relief and waking him up from whatever shivering doze he's managed to slip into. He's going to be relieved for sentry duty in probably the next hour, and he's almost looking forward to it.

At least it'll stop the mounting frustration at not managing to sleep when these are the only few short hours he has to do so.

Harry has just managed to sink into something resembling quiet in his head, when his ears prick up. He can hear a wet, scrabbling somewhere out there in the dark, but brushes it aside in his slow, exhaustion-addled brain. It's probably a tree, or someone messing around going for a piss. Harry shuts his eyes and tries to fall back into oblivion.

It seems like the next second, something is on top of him, sopping wet and smelling like damp dog. Harry recoils, instantly fighting to get out of his sleeping bag and out from under whatever his attacker is. He hears laughter, low, gravelly chuckles, and realises that it's a human being - and there's two of them. His blood freezes, and his struggles intensify. If there are two then unless he can fight them off quickly, he's done for.

They don't even bother clapping a hand over his mouth - but why would they? Instead he's unceremoniously ripped out of the sleeping bag, arms pressed painfully behind his back.

"So fucking handy, isn't it?" someone grunts, as they start to rip Harry's uniform off him. His shirt gets caught on the bone of his shoulder, and the next hard yank feels like it nearly dislocates it. "Don't even need to shut him up."

Another laugh. "Yeah, how do we know he *doesn't* want it?"

"Probably does - look at him, staring at us so sweetly all day with those big green eyes." They're not even bothering to keep their voices down, and with another flash, the tents lights up with a growl and Harry sees the dirty, sweat encrusted face of Bisker, whites of his eyes gleaming. He's grinning, hand down his trousers, and Harry finally places the voice of the person holding his hands behind him.

It's Thompson. If Harry wasn't desperately trying to prevent himself from whatever it is they're planning to do, he'd probably be surprised - the guy seemed, for all intents and purposes, to be a nice enough, if not a little shy, eighteen year old with mousy hair and a quiet voice.

That kind of does it, the fact that this little fucking *twig* of a teenager thinks he can get away with this, that Harry will let him. He redoubles his efforts, slamming an elbow backwards. With some satisfaction he hears a pained groan, before someone claps in in the face and for a second he sees stars.

He digs his nails in wherever he can, biting down on anything he can find - fabric, skin, fingers. His teeth hit something hard, and a salty taste wells up in his mouth. Disgusted, he spits the blood out, before he's slammed down on the hard earth.

"My fucking finger! You mute *freak*." The word is accompanied with a kick to his stomach, the force curving into his ribs with enough momentum to knock the air from his lungs.

His trousers are pushed down, and for a second Harry thinks *this is it, this is when he gets raped and he can't fucking do anything and he wants to kill them all, raze this entire fucking place down to the ground and burn it-*

Suddenly the weight is off him, the two men letting out twin squeaks of surprise as they're hefted up and thrown out of the tent and into the rain. Harry hears the thwack of a punch and a following moan of pain. He gasps for breath and scrabbles to right his clothes, looking up.

"Why don't you both fuck off? Fucking pansies."

The voice fits the huge, bulging shape in front of him, and Harry realises it's Lewis. He has a distant thought of wondering if Lewis knows he's more of a 'pansy' than either of them, that he's shared a bed with another boy for the last six years of his life, before the relief washes over him, leaves him shaking with it.

Two shadowy shapes twist up to their feet, shaky curses spilling from their lips as they stagger off, slipping in the mud.

"They should know better," Lewis spits to the side, disgusted. He's crouched down, half in the tent, now sloppy with dirt. He peers inside at Harry, eyes running over him for injuries.

Harry can feel one side of his face is on fire, the skin around his left eye puffy and tender to touch. When he wipes his mouth, the back of his hand comes away bloody. All he can do is nod.

Lewis nods back gravely, and shuts the flap, giving him the kind illusion of privacy. Harry squirms to the back of the tent, on top of his sleeping bag and watches the entrance without blinking.

He doesn't sleep again.

freed

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Tom is sick to death of all the pointless blood and gore and pain that he has to look at day in, day out, he lets himself think about the boy he left behind.

Tom has *always* thought Harry is beautiful, right from the first moment he'd wandered back to his orphanage dorm, bored out of his brains, and stumbled upon a fierce little cub of a boy, glaring up at him so angry and so *sad*. Harry is his favourite treasure, and has been for six or seven years now (although the silver chain that hangs around his neck, nestled close to his heart at all times, is an important second).

Tom misses being able to look at his eyes, more than anything. Green and vibrant, and so communicative. Tom could always tell what Harry was feeling from the sheer emotion swirling around in those two little rock pools peering out at the world

Tom sighs. The war is horrible. He doesn't necessarily mind the killing, not in the same way the other men do. They jerk awake at night to claw at their hair, gibbering and crying and talking of ghosts. Tom has no qualms in ending a life. Sometimes it can be fun, just to see what happens and how far a man can be pushed before he breaks. He quite likes being the last thing they ever see, that he gets to end a living, breathing human being containing an entire, whirring universe of thinking, feeling and hoping. It makes him feel powerful to be the one to end it all, so *easily* - all it takes is a tiny thumbnail of lead alloy to punch a small hole in their bag of skin and flesh and bones, and then their life pours out in red rivulets, swallowed up by the greedy sand.

Death is natural. It's probably the most natural thing about life: it has to end at some point. Everything, everybody dies. Tom has been listening to one of the university professors in his platoon. 'Tom', as he views himself, only exists because a number of atoms are currently ordered in a specific way. He exists on the strange chance that out of all the ways they could be ordered, they fall into place in that *particular* way. Why should he angry if they float apart or come undone? He's just grateful that they formed him at all, even just for a blink.

And this is why he and Harry are meant to be. This all happened at the *exact same time* as Harry's atoms formed him. Harry's atoms and Tom's atoms obviously have some strange connection. Maybe they formed part of the same whole at some point in the last eternity, or maybe they're just made from the same building block. But whatever it is, Harry and Tom are the same, they're *one thing*, are perfect. It's obvious just in the fact that they exist (firstly) and that they do so at the same time (secondly), in the same place (thirdly). Their meeting is cosmic luxury.

Sometimes Tom wonders if Harry knows that he's an omnipresent presence, lodged like a sickness right in the back of Tom's head and deep in his heart at all times. He saturates Tom's happiness, his sadness, his anger, his apathy. He's wrapped around the inside of Tom's soul like hot, sticky oil, stained it with himself.

And then he can't help but chuckle. Of course Harry knows. Because Tom is definitely right there in Harry's too: carved into the skin of his shoulder, into the fabric of his being.

He sighs again and fires his gun. He doesn't even flinch at the loud bang anymore, just watches dispassionately as the man who he'd been staring at flops to the ground, tunic already stained brown and limbs finally relaxing out of their clawed agony.

"Darling," he hums under his breath as he kicks the body to make sure the man is dead, "wait for me, I'm coming."

*

Harry sees his chance and takes it.

For Bisker he wants something painful, something humiliating and debasing, like what he had intended for Harry. He's not worried about the timing, in fact he was willing to wait until they shipped out (after all, a death would be so much more easily camouflaged in the middle of a thousand others) but it's almost like fate smiles over him.

He's at the back of the line again, ambling on behind Lewis as they keep marching forwards, up and up and up. This time it's more out of choice than because Harry is unfit - he doesn't want anyone behind him, wants to be able to see the two of them, way up ahead.

Bisker and Thompson won't look him in the eyes or go anywhere near him now. Especially not since Lewis has taken it upon himself to accompany Harry for this last day of their hike. He'd noted with some satisfaction that Thompson's nose was broken, lip split, and that Bisker's crumpled finger was wrapped in a shoddily-applied bandage. Serves them right. Harry himself has a horrible black eye, the colour of a cold sunset, and his ribs hurt if he twists too quickly.

They're walking along a ridge in the hill, forest on one side and a steep drop down on the other where the view widens out to endless pale green patches of English countryside, lines and ridges crisscrossing like some huge, bright quilt. Little tendrils of white smoke curl towards the soft morning sky from ant-size houses.

It's quietly, calmly beautiful.

He looks back to the trees on his left, eyes running over dark blue shadows cloaking the vegetation, tracking the slightest movement - understandably he's a little jumpy. There's a small stream a little further in, ambient noise all but forgotten in the heave of their breathing and the *drip drip drip* of sweat down his temples.

Harry comes up short as he realises what he's looking at: a little further in there's the unmistakable hulking shape of a dead animal. His heart jumps, and he looks up to see Lewis picking his way around the corner and slipping out of sight.

It's perfect.

Harry blinks, and then rockets into the forest, trying to be as quiet and quick as possible. He falls to his knees, uncaring that soil and icy water are soaking through the stiff material. It's a dead sheep - curly cream fur matted with writhing maggots and dirt. Harry doesn't have time to cover his mouth even though the smell makes his eyes water. It's been dead at least a week, viscera spilling out into the water of the stream.

Unscrewing the metal cap of his bottle, Harry chugs as much of the clean water as he can before tipping the rest out. He wrinkles his nose but dutifully holds the bottle downstream of the rotting animal, watching as clear water runs in, filling it up. Quickly rescrewing it, Harry shoves it back in his equipment belt and darts out the forest, not looking back. He bursts out into the daylight, back onto the path and strides quickly, catching up with the others.

Lewis is waiting for him around the bend, and raises his eyebrows when he sees Harry half-running uphill. The older man glances down at his wet knees thoughtfully but says nothing.

They continue walking on for another few hours until they break for lunch on a grassy plateau. The air fills with the sounds of the men heaving off their bags and their equipment belts, stretching out their aching limbs. Dawes is shouting at people about something or other, striding around and giving directions for setting up the little fires that will cook their rations. Harry forces himself to push down his thirst and looks around for his target.

He takes his chance as soon as Bisker turns to say something to one of the other recruits. Slowly, he picks his way past the obstacle course of men and bags, before feigning a stumble. His water bottle clangs out of his hands, rolling right next to the ugly, thickset man. Harry wastes no time in bending down and picking it up, but Bisker looks up and sneers.

"Back for more Potter?" His eyes are hard and cold, and he gives a little short grin of satisfaction when Harry turns to face him and his bruised cheek comes into view.

In return, Harry lets his blank gaze drift down to Bisker's finger.

The other man's smile drops off his face. He makes to get up but Harry is pulled away by Lewis, who has crept up behind him. He gives him a little push to get him moving back towards where they dumped their kit, and Harry dutifully follows.

"What are you doing, trying to antagonise him?" Lewis hisses, amazed, as soon as they're out of earshot. "Do you have a death wish, Potter?"

Harry takes a seat on the hard earth, untying his bag and digging a hand in to retrieve the small ration pack. He shrugs as takes a long sip of water, and tries as hard as he can to stop smiling.

*

All good things come to those who wait.

Bisker already begins to look a bit pale as they start the descent back to base. Nothing major but he'd been one of the first on the way up, and the more they walk, the more he lags, clearly overtaken by others. Harry vindictively hopes the day gets hotter in the afternoon.

Thompson has been keeping a conspicuously low profile. The moronic teenager has obviously been trying to avoid him, glances nervously first at Harry, and then at Lewis when they do catch sight of each other.

He knows he's being greedy, and rushing things, but when Thompson stops to go to the toilet, Harry just can't help himself.

The idiot decides that a little flat ledge on the side of the hill is a great place, and Harry watches with disgust from above as he looks around and shoves his trousers down. It's like he *wants* Harry to do it. Maybe he subconsciously *knows* that he's a waste of oxygen, and this is his way of asking for help?

Harry knows how to walk silently, how to move inconspicuously and unseen. In moments like this, he has to be grateful for his narrow frame and small stature. Once again, he dips away from the group and steals down. From there, it's almost painfully easy to sneak up on Thompson. He's squatting down on the rough grey earth, facing away from Harry's approach and humming softly to himself. It's all too easy for Harry to lunge forward and deliver a short, effective kick to his back.

The wiry strength in Thompson's legs is actually rather surprising. Instead of falling straight forward as Harry has intended, the boy does a strange crab-shuffle, skidding round the rocky edge of the ledge and swaying. He whirls around, letting out a shout and, as his arms flail, his nails tear painfully at the skin of Harry's face.

Harry grits his teeth and *pushes,* with the combined weight of his body and his pack.

It's a glorious moment - the sun is shining after the rain of last night, and the echoing scream is the sweetest music Harry's ever heard. Thompson doesn't even fall that far, but it's far enough and at a sufficiently awkward angle that Harry can hear the hard crunch of his neck folding under his head, which slams into the limestone so hard that there's an instant red puddle. He peers down as the body twitches, and huffs out a little pleased smile, taking a deep breath of the fresh country air.

Harry merrily picks his way back up the hill, and manages to rejoin the back of the group pretty unnoticed - they've disbanded from their solitary line after hearing the shout, and in the confusion he slips right back in.

Maybe it's arrogant and dangerous, but he doesn't even bother to feign surprise when they find the body.

*

They make it back to the barracks two hours late, all the men as silent as Harry is for a change, and as grey as Bisker, who just looks worse and worse as night falls. Bisker's obviously been running his mouth, as people keep throwing Harry horrified, distrustful glances, but he doesn't care. It seems he's acquired a new nickname, which the men now mutter under the breath as they skirt around him. Nobody aside from Lewis wants to get too close, and Harry makes sure to grin sweetly at them with all his teeth.

They're calling him '*hellhound'* now, and Harry is taken aback for a second with how weirdly similar it is to what they used to call him at the orphanage. Does he really scream biblical wrath to most people? Nearly everyone in the infantry has a nickname, it's almost like a rite of passage, but it's a little amusing that he seems to once again have gotten himself one with connotations to the devil.

Harry sighs. Hellhound.

Well, he misses his devil; he wonders what Tom would think of it... he'd probably be delighted.

As he considers this, Harry walks back from a cold, evening shower, just turning to enter the dorms when he catches something out of the corner of his eye. The drill sergeant is a tall, motionless shadow, waiting rigidly next to the door to his room.

His eyes, a little more shrewd than Harry has previously given him credit for, seem to catch on the long red scratch curving round his jaw, bright from the shock of the shower. Harry stares at him as he takes a few steps closer, swinging something from his finger.

The sterile light from the strip in the ceiling catches, and Harry realises it's a standard-issue water bottle, a dented metallic cylinder. Dawes hands it to him, a strange expression on his face.

"Potter. I believe you forgot this," he says oddly. On autopilot, Harry reaches out and takes it, saluting with trepidation as Dawes nods.

Harry looks down and has to fight to keep his expression even. It's his water bottle - the one he gave to Bisker. He knows this, because the base of the bottle still has the word *POTTER* that he'd scratched on when he'd first received it.

The sergeant begins to walk away, before he suddenly stops, arms hanging loosely by his sides. Harry watches as his fingers curl into fists. "Private Bisker is currently shitting blood and puking up his guts in the infirmary. Doc calls Weil's... he's not expected to pull through the night."

Harry stops breathing, waiting.

Dawes eyes him. "Just thought you should know," he calls as he walks away.

Chapter End Notes

Seeing as a couple of people have asked - nope, Harry will not be remaining mute for the whole story. Hope you enjoyed the Tom POV!

break

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He's so fucking sick of *sand*.

It coats everything, his food, his hands, gritty against his eyelashes in the morning. His scalp itches, and when he rubs his nails through his (short!) hair the fucking stuff showers down in a light patter. It's inescapable, rubs everywhere possible raw and chafed, to match the sunburn he has on the tips of his nose and ears. The army commission suncream is rationed out like gold - thick, gloopy stuff which smells like antiseptic and is also, coincidentally, turned into some kind of exfoliant as the sand somehow worms it's way into the bottles too. It stops them burning though, and so is prized somehow more highly than cigarettes. Harry dutifully slaps it on his neck, face and collarbones every morning. There are a thousand iterations of white splatters all over his thin desert issue uniform, but at this point their light khaki issued shirt and trousers are so covered in dust and dirt that it's somehow blends in anyway.

He's been in North Africa for seven months now, and El Agheila for two weeks. After pushing back the Italians, they've been ordered to stop advancing in order for Allied troops to be able to get out to Greece, where they're sorely needed. And to be honest, Harry thinks their best tanks and equipment are slowly being siphoned away for this purpose too. It's not like he knows for sure though, seeing as commands are more like Chinese whispers at this point. It takes an age for any kind of of order to disseminate and consequently they're all just milling around at the moment, buzzing with the familiar low-level stress that's been an ever present companion since they joined the Western Desert Campaign. Potentially being shot at or stabbed at any point can do that to you.

If he's honest, Harry has felt somewhat numb since he stepped foot on the continent. This whole war is absolutely fucking futile. He kills boys, he kills old men - fathers, brothers, uncles, sons. He stands by and feels nothing while innocents get caught in the crossfire and children die. Most of the people he kills have really done nothing to him - they just happen to have been born on the wrong side of this war. They're ordinary people, but they've been caged in with lies and propaganda. They aren't nazis, Harry doesn't even think they give two shits about the jews. They don't *enjoy* what they're doing.

It begets some reflection. Simply put, most people aren't motivated by a need to destroy and to cause pain. Most people can only be brought to this level of animalism out of the drive to protect the people they love and the values they cherish. He looks in the face of a scared sixteen year old, younger than he is, and knows resolutely that this boy *did not have a choice*. But he kills him anyway because that's what it means to fight for a cause.

He does the only thing he can do: he keeps calm and carries on. Keeps firing, running, shaking, going to sleep at night itching away the sand and perpetual thirst. He's been

surrounded by other men for so long now that he's forgotten what silence sounds like. But it doesn't matter, because every day he inches closer to Tom.

When Harry thinks about how scared he'd been when they'd killed those brothers, on his second day at the orphanage, how terrified he was of being found out, he wants to laugh. Back then he'd thought he was going to hell, that if anyone ever got proof he'd be sent down to rot in jail. Well now he knows there are worse things than jail and it may be a platitude, but he can safely say he's been through hell already. He kills more days than he doesn't - indiscriminately, to the point where he no longer gets that curl of glee or sharp little bite of thrill. It's more of a task at this point, a box he has to tick to advance.

He wonders if it's the same for Tom... but then the other boy had always enjoyed it more. He'd always found a way to make it personal.

"Harry!"

Harry looks up from where he's trying to sew up a tear in the worn knee of his trousers. His gaze passes to the other side of the fire (he purposefully doesn't look at it, sits as far away as he can and tries to hold his breath against the smoke when the soft wind turns), to where some unknown man with a babyface and soft blue eyes is beckoning him, eyes bubbling with laughter.

Harry sighs. Lewis is next to the stranger, cheeks ruddy with alcohol and smiling like an idiot.

He cocks an eyebrow and puts down the trousers. He's currently in his spare pair, and they're much too short on him now. He's shot up in the last year, although he's still not exactly what one would term 'tall'. More like he's finally reached the cusp of average.

"Hey Harry, Lewis said you came all this way to find ya friend?" Babyface slurs the words slightly, grinning. Harry resists the urge to roll his eyes. Bloody Lewis and his loose mouth.

The man in question bats down the stranger's pointing fingers with clumsy paws. "I didn't, Haz," he says, words running into each other like dominos. "I jus' said that your looking for your laddie - and asked Johnnie if he knew of a Riddle."

The thought that this could be the Johnnie that Riddle supposedly scared off so Harry had a bed makes him smile, and unfortunately Johnnie takes it as encouragement.

"Anybody? Our darling hellhound here's looking for a Riddle-"

"Oh - hang on, what has an eye, but cannot-"

"Fuck *off* Chambers," someone grumbles, and the group of men burst into sniggers as the man who spoke before opens his mouth, affronted.

"I just-"

"Anyway," Johnnie interrupts pointedly, taking another swig from his metal hip flask and spitting at the fire. It gets oddly cold at night here, despite the fact that the sand and sky

blister during the day. "Any of you ugly chaps know a Riddle? No? Tall, black hair, little bit strange, bit quiet. Bit like this one here." He waves his hand at Harry.

"But tall," Lewis contributes, and someone snorts.

They lapse into silence again, listening to the churn of the infantry at night. Talking, laughter, clangs of metal, the sound of tents being zipped up and stumbled into. At this point it's a pretty comforting background noise, and Harry can't even hear it unless he makes himself listen.

Harry unscrews the top of his own hip flask and takes another sip. The cheap whiskey burns on the way down. It tastes like dirt, but it makes his heart feel a little less torn and bloody. Distantly he writes the letters 'HP' in the hot, dry air, and Lewis notices.

"Oh yeah. Got 'HP' carved into his back, courtesy of Harry here."

Harry sometimes wonders if he should have shared that little tidbit with Lewis. It was one night after a bullet had grazed his rib as he turned, and he'd thought he was going to die. He remembers his face wet, hands bloody as they'd bandaged up the deep, singed cut on his side, Lewis giving up his share of whiskey rations to let Harry drown his absolutely filthy fucking *fear.* He'd been weak and afraid and he'd scribbled out who he was trying to find with shaking hands, tears dripping on the page, telling Lewis if he died *find Tom*, he needed to know, Harry needed to tell him he was *sorry*, that he'd tried to find you but *I couldn't.*

He'd thrown up his guts and passed out, and the next day the only other remaining man from Harry's unit had died, legs blown off up until the waist, and Harry had watched him look down and see half of himself missing.

He hadn't needed the whiskey again. But it was nice to drink occasionally, when he wanted the world to get quieter.

He's snapped out of his cold nostalgia as their Lieutenant appears. He looks fatigue stained, and somehow even more tired than they do. His uniform is still strangely pristine though, and his grey eyes are cloudy as he surveys them snap to their feet and salute.

"At ease," he says, voice ringing out clearly, almost at odds with his appearance. "Is there a Potter, Lewis and uhhhh-", he glances down at some paper in his hand, "A Peters amongst you?"

Harry, Lewis and Peters step forward in unison, mumbling a "Sir," and trading apprehensive glances.

"Right. Follow me," he says, and strides off. Harry kneels and grabs his gun, swinging it over his shoulder. A few fat black insects buzz into his face and he irritatedly swats them away. He'll be happy if he never sees another fly again.

Some stranger calls out from his left, a soft voice that he doesn't recognise. "Potter--"

He doesn't get to hear the end of the sentence, as right then their Corporal pops up out of nowhere and tugs him roughly to his feet. He's young, fresh off the boat, and it's obvious in his awkward aggression. Also apparently moves like a fucking ninja - Harry didn't notice him arrive at all.

"God you're not drunk are you?" he asks, disgusted, shoving a map in his direction. Harry shakes his head, and Lewis does too. Harry eyes him warily: he's definitely drunk, although seems to be sobering up quickly.

"Right, great. Well, follow on then," he says shortly, picking his way through the packs and rifles, and quickly hurrying after the Lieutenant.

They make their way to one of the officer's tents, where the Lieutenant is standing with an unfamiliar short man. They have a map pinned up on the green wall, and Harry can't help but look around, intrigued. It's a pretty basic tent but there's a hell of a lot of documents piled up on makeshift shelves, and the furniture in here is a little more well-kept than theirs. The yellow lamps on the walls cast a sickly, pallid glow to the room, a little like a hospital. Harry fidgets, shifting the weight between his feet as they wait for the officers to talk.

They have a mission, the Corporal explains, face stern. It's pretty simple but serious - a group of Italian POWs have fled, and they've managed to take a proximity fuse with them. They can't have escaped for long, but the alarm was just raised and they need a group to kill them and retrieve the equipment.

None of them argue about the questionable morality of that - it's war. The Italians' chance has dissolved.

They go back to their tents, dress and make sure they have enough ammunition. They're given a compass and a map and pointed in the right direction, but most of the men can pretty much navigate by constellations at this point. The arid sky is a deep, dark indigo, completely flat and pricked with tiny stars; it's usually pin-point clear at night, and Harry knows instantly which way is North just from the lights way up above them.

Harry makes Lewis drink a pint of warm, coppery water before they set off, and forces him to eat a ration bar. It should be fine, as they have rifles and apparently the Italians do not, but he still feels uneasy. It should be ok though - they're usually pretty tipsy going into battle anyway, as it's the only thing that gets them to walk into *open fucking fire*.

*

They find them after two hours of walking, each sliding, sandy step requiring more effort than it should. They manage to sneak up on them, holding the three at gunpoint. Nobody wants to shoot yet - they didn't expect them to be so young and the Italians are just kids, down on their knees and bawling in a language none of them can understand.

They're trading uneasy glances, silently arguing about how they're going to do this, when Lewis grabs one by the scruff of the uniform to haul him to his feet and the little bastard screams and pulls out a knife.

The blade goes in, and Harry swears he can feel every single vein it rips through. Time slows down: Lewis goes still, gaping, before gasping in a shuddering breath, face dropping of colour in all of three heartbeats. Red begins to drip out, and he staggers backwards, a horrible, garbled wet noise crunching in the back of his throat as the soldier wrenches the blade out.

Harry's heart stops and then starts again, pounding with such force that he shakes with it.

"No, no, no." He hears his friend say, watches numbly as Peters fires his rifle with a cry and the boy lets out a scream before he goes down, still smiling. His friends drop to their knees, heads on the floor in supposition. They know they're already dead.

Lewis' eyes turn to Harry but he doesn't think his friend actually sees him. His empty stare is so sad, glinting in the low light, and when he opens his mouth to talk, his teeth are stained red. Some of it dribbles out in little spit bubbles, dropping down his stubble, and then- then some strange shift occurs.

Harry has watched men die enough times in the last year to know what it looks like.

Something is screaming in his chest, something so hard and deep and terrible that Harry almost doubles over from the pain. The remaining soldiers are talking at him in quick, pitted Italian, begging as Lewis slumps into the hot earth, body no longer inhabited by his cheeky grin and kind, patient hands. Harry feels something deep inside him break and suddenly the world comes into focus in a way it never has before.

He's never felt this angry - even when Tom was taken away from him, even when Bisker was pulling open his clothes and pawing at him. It's not hot, surprisingly. Harry feels completely calm, shrouded in ice and strangely numb. Even when he looks at Lewis' body, strewn in an undignified mess beneath him, the grief slips through his fingers like sand, and his heart is completely still in his chest.

He turns and looks at the two boys, hears the words fall out of his mouth in a horrible, rusted croak.

"I'm going to kill you," he says, and the calmness of the words startles him as much as the fact they came from his lips.

Chapter End Notes

WELL this has been a pretty depressing chapter... (i say to myself every fucking chapter)

seen

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Harry is crying. His head hurts and his stomach hurts and everything feels foggy and distant, like he's looking up through deep water. His eyes burn and sting with the heat of his forehead, but his limbs won't stop shaking with cold.

He knows he's very sick. An illness has been going round the orphanage, to the dismay of Mumma Minnie, and it latches onto the children and squeezes them dry, leaves them withered up husks or worse. Four children have been buried so far, and Umbridge is getting desperate - she's started locking them up in 'quarantine' if they so much as sneeze.

Harry has been in this tiny room by himself all day, locked in like a dog. In the morning he'd passed out whilst scrubbing the floors, and they'd taken one look at his white face and marched him to the far corner of the building, bundled him up and shoved him inside.

He uncurls from the ball he's scrounged his limbs into, pushing his damp hair out of his face. He could have sworn he heard shouts - or was that just the ringing in his head?

The door bangs open, and Harry is too dopey to even flinch, just breathes shakily through his mouth, watching with sleepy eyelids as Tom crashes through. His face is lit up in fury, and Harry could almost cry with relief. If he's going to die, he wants to at least be able to say goodbye.

Tom murmurs his name and slips into the bed, gentle hands worming their way under Harry's shoulders and tugging him effortlessly into his lap. At thirteen, Harry is small and thin, and Tom can pick him up far too easily. The other boy's body is warm, and he smells like comfort. Harry buries his hot face into his shoulder and whines through the dizziness of the sudden movement. Cool hands swipe over his cheeks, smearing the tears there, to rest briefly on his forehead and Harry hears Tom bite out a curse.

"Harry. Harry, wake up," Tom says gently, but Harry thinks he can detect a note of panic in his voice. "How long have you been in here darling?" he asks, hand gripping under his chin to raise his head.

"Morning," Harry mumbles, followed by: "too hot."

He thinks about how he doesn't want to leave Tom alone, that if he dies he'll fight tooth and nail to come back and haunt him so at least he'll still have Harry. Harry *doesn't want to die*, it's not *fair* - and he doesn't realise he's been saying this out loud until Tom physically shakes him like he can't stop himself.

"You're not going to die," Tom promises him vehemently. "I won't let you, do you hear me?"

Harry finds the energy to grin. That's just like Tom, he's so stubborn that even a little old thing like death probably wouldn't stop him.

Tom holds up the cup of water on the little rickety table, pressing it to Harry's lips, but he doesn't even have the strength to swallow. He's not thirsty, in any case, he's so full and so horrible sloshy already.

There's a pause, and Harry's mind drifts with the fever, before Tom's mouth is on his. Harry's lips fall open in shock--why *now*, of all times, when he's boiling with fever and can hardly think straight?

But then Tom's mouth is parting and cool water is flowing into Harry's throat. He swallows on reflex and Tom pulls away. There's some quiet movement and then he's back, another mouthful pushing through Harry's lips. Dutifully, he lets the water slip down his throat, focuses on the feeling of Tom's arms around him, the way the other boy somehow makes the pain fade.

Tom's grip on him tightens. "I'm going to make you better," he whispers into Harry's hair, and Harry feels a little better at the words, enough to shift his head to press the tiniest little kiss to Tom's cheek, before he sags with exhaustion.

He hears Tom let out a little laugh, but it sounds strange, a little too raw to be anything but fear.

Harry finds himself falling, surrendering to the numb void of sleep, now that Tom is holding him, anchoring him to the earth.

*

He shocks back into his body, a great heaving into awakening.

He stares, uncomprehending, at Peters. He’s babbling at him, his hands flying all over the place as he gestures, but Harry can’t hear a thin. There’s machine gun fire in his ears… no, wait, that’s his heart, isn’t it?

Harry tries to focus on Peters’ lips, the shapes they make.

Riddle, Harry sees, and then curses himself for the brief flash of pain the word brings him.

“What?” he asks.

Peters stops, stares at him with wide, despondent eyes. They look like horses eyes, when the guns go off, all white and roiling.

“What is it?” Harry repeats, relieved that at least he can hear his own voice now.

In increments, Peters lean body starts to sag with relief, until he has his head in his hands.

“Oh God. Oh fuck,” the older man says. It’s jarring—Peters has always been the stoic one. Harry doesn’t think he’s ever really heard him swear.

Harry looks around and realises that his hand hurts. He looks down. His fist is a dark, dirty red and clenched, and it takes him a few moment to be able to unclench it.

Something drops to the floor.

Harry watches as the flies descend and feels like he might throw up.

Why was he holding a tongue?

And then it comes back. Lewis. The Italian boys. He can see them all, lumps on the sand. And his voice.

“Did you say Riddle?”

His voice sounds wrong, like it doesn't belong to him, and the words aren't as crisp as he's used to hearing; his tongue is a fumbling, new-born kitten.

Peters wipes at his eyes and then stands straight. Harry isn’t surprised at the sudden settling of emotion; feelings are modular now, fleeting.

“Yeah,” he croaks. “You kept saying it under your breath.”

Harry takes a stale breath of desert air. He lets the disappointment wash over him and evaporate.

“Sorry,” he says half-heartedly.

Peters shakes his head an looks like he wants to say something, but then his eyes catch on Lewis. “What a bloody idiot,” he says numbly.

Harry chews the inside of his mouth so hard he tastes blood. “We can’t carry him back,” he says. “We don’t have a stretcher.”

Peters nods.

“Did you get the fuse?” Harry asks, and then hates himself.

Again, he gets a nod. Peters hand goes to his belt. “Took it off them after you, er, dispatched the POWs.”

For a moment Harry is concerned he’ll get in trouble. British military shouldn’t go around ripping tongues out, and all—no, if you want to torture like that then you need a licence. But then he remembers what their CO had said when they first arrived: *no one gives a shit about Italians in the dunes.*

“Lets go,” he says, with his throat on fire. “Get back and send someone back for him.”

Peters’ face goes blank and Harry knows they’re thinking the same thing, that the sand is hungry here, it swallows up anything and everything. In thirty minutes Lewis will be in a shifting, churning grave. He can already hear the buzz of the flies.

But grief is like a bruise; it only hurts when you press on it.

The sickness fades away as they walk away, watched by three pairs of unseeing eyes. They follow their own footprints in silence, until they reach a calm, wide stretch where they've blow away.

Harry starts to ache with loneliness. He wants Tom. He wants the only person who would know how he felt without him having to speak. He wants someone who knows him, who understands him. It’s another thing they give up here: to be someone is to be known, and now they’re all half-people, stumbling around trying to pick up the wet, limp ends of friendship and love and tie new knots.

The base shimmers on the horizon by the time Peters breaks the quiet.

“Do you know the Psycho Sarge?”

Harry blinks. *The what?*

Peters nods, as if he expected it. “It’s a nickname for this sergeant heading up a unit in the 11th Hussars.”

“Ok…” Harry says.

Peters huffs with amusement, but it doesn’t reach his eyes. “I think his name is Riddle.”

*

They have to break the news to the others after they debrief and hand in the fuse. Nobody suggests going out to get his body.

Lewis was well-liked. The general mood in the camp sours in ripples as the news spreads, until the men clump together around the tents, staring into the fire.

“Jesus christ, you all run out of rum or something?” one of the junior officers scoffs as he hurries by.

“Shut up,” his friend hisses at him.

Harry doesn't know how to feel. He's blank and cold and grieving, but at the same time his heart feels like it's skipping every other beat. His hands haven't stopped trembling since Peters told him.

So Riddle is here. He's alive, and he's here, and he's been—what, promoted? Harry's somehow not surprised. People follow Tom, they always have.

Psycho Sarge though… *what have you done now*, Harry thinks?

There's not a lot of time to dwell on things. When he wakes up the next morning with the dawn, the fort is already in chaos. He stumbles out, manages to grab someone running past to ask what's going on.

"Being swapped out," the guy yells over his shoulder as he heads to the breakfast tent, "larger unit's coming in to replace us in a couple of hours."

Great, Harry thinks, and sighs.

He eventually learns that their unit will be heading on to Mersa Bréga, another flat expanse of nothingness on the coast that will take a couple of days of marching to reach.

Dutifully, he starts to pack up his bag. It's almost the same size as him when he's finished, and he scowls down at it, already imagining the sores on his back that two days marching will give him.

"Potter," someone yells. "Final swim?"

They have about thirty minutes of free time before the new boys arrive.

"Alright," he says back, snorting at the look of confusion he gets. He hasn't told anyone his voice has come back, and he's quite enjoying the reactions.

He gets thrown into the sea when they hear, fully-clothed.

He surfaces, spits the salt out of his mouth and then laughs when the men charge in after him, yelling and splashing.

For a while he floats, looking back towards the beach where the tide breathes green around the shore and then flowers into a white field.

Eventually though, they have to go. He wades out and tries to ring out his clothes until they're damp, rather than dripping. They steam quietly in the brightness as he makes his way back up the path to the fort.

The new boys have already arrived. He stops by his bag to watch the line of men weave past. The unfamiliar soldiers look as tired and chalky as they do, faces awash with the standard issue apprehension.

“Where the hell’s our platoon leader?” someone asks.

“Went to go find out where we’re supposed to go to.”

Harry sighs and sits on the ground, bracing himself for at least three hours of music chairs as the army tries to coordinate itself.

The pop of a rifle goes off, and Watford, a young lad around Harry’s age, flinches.

“Christ,” he says, “what are these, rookies?”

Harry snorts. “Probably someone playing cans,” he says, but then other bangs follow, like a confetti of fireworks.

All of them go still. Silence creaks its way through the base for a few frail seconds until someone screams.

Chaos descends. Men grab their weapons, stony-faced with surprise, and Harry’s platoon leader suddenly gets his shit together and screams at them to get behind the stone wall at the back of the base.

It’s ironic, he thinks, that they’re so quick to organise when they’re being shot at, and so poor at it the rest of the time.

It soon becomes apparent that despite the doubling in number, they are woefully unprepared. As a regiment, they’re thinly spread from Egypt up into Libya, and their men and equipment have been steadily siphoned off to Greece for a while now.

They settle, crouching near the corner of a building, trading worried glances. His own sergeant spits into the sand, and then stares at them.

We’re pulling back, he says shortly, and picks around twenty men to defend their retreat.

Murphy's law in action, Harry thinks with black humour as someone shoves him forward. He thumbs the metal of his rifle reassuringly, feeling the hard impassivity of the handle.

It always takes him some mental engineering to bring up the blood lust. It’s right at his fingertips now though, all he has to do is press on that bruise, deep under his skin, Lewis’ soft breath as he’d been stabbed to death, and that thing inside his head pricks up, hungry and full of rage.

He creeps to round to the front of the fort, breathing steadily, and kneels.

Breath in, hold it…

His shoulder aches as the rifle kicks back, and his ears blister, but a German goes flying back, a scream flashing through the air. It's disgustingly satisfying.

He shoots again. Ducks, as the stone next to his head chips with the force of a bullet.

There’s sweat in his eyes but he hardly dares to leave his rifle long enough to wipe it away.

Bang. Bang. Bang.

His ears ring.

Movement next to him as some unfamiliar soldier skids to his knees, hunches up against the barrel of his gun.

They trade a solemn glance of cooperation and Harry moves to cover him.

*

Well, twenty minutes later he’s still alive.

The order comes through the ragged lungs of the men still left: “we’re heading back!”

Harry feels a little glimmer of relief break through his iron concentration. It’s quickly swallowed by nerves: they only have two tanks left to cover them. The booms as the shells hit are so loud they make this teeth tremble, but he’d rather put up with that then try to run without them.

A dust cloud clears and the sky shines through again. There’s something surreal about the bright blue. It would be a lovely day, if he wasn’t about to die.

A bullet flies past his leg and he scrambles to the side. The beautifully savage feeling from earlier has left, and now he feels empty and numb to the prospect of his death.

He dispatches another enemy soldier, before sitting with his back to a wall to reload. The Germans are weaving their way through, clotting in the narrow paths and surging up towards the path of their retreat. If he doesn't leave now, he'll be taken. Or probably killed. The only problem is that they've been instructed to lay mines in their wake, and Harry's understandably terrified of accidentally getting blow up by a mine his own unit has left.

He’s careful as he picks his way along a path, edging backwards.

He hears a scream, and whips his head around to see a soldier hit the ground. He can't even tell if it's one of his own.

"Not this way," a deep voice yells at him, and Harry nods, backtracking.

He pauses. Looks back.

The speaker is crouched on the ground, calmly digging into the sand to position a mine. There's a strange feeling in Harry's chest, an odd, slow seep of adrenaline that he can't work out.

He stares, and maybe the man can feel the gaze, as he looks up, desert cap tilting back enough for Harry to make out the pinprick of his features across the distance.

For a moment, he wonders if he's been shot. He can't breathe, can't hear the pop of rifles, the scream of the dying. Just an odd, steady silence.

Tom looks different. His face is thin and sharp, and he looks older than twenty with deep shadows under his eyes. He's bigger now, takes up space, large shoulders and big, dusty boots. Even with blood spattered all up one side of his face, he's still the loveliest thing Harry has ever seen.

Tom goes still, hands still curved around the hot metal of the mine. Harry wishes he could record it somehow, play it back over and over: Tom's whole body jerks, like he's been shot, as he realises who exactly it is that he's locked eyes with. His lips move, twist around Harry's own name, big almond eyes growing wide with disbelief.

And then, despite the distance between them, the idiot springs to his feet and begins to sprint towards him.

"Shit!" Harry hisses, as instantly a few Germans swing in his direction.

He's on autopilot as he kneels, braces his rifle and goes after them, hands steadier than they've ever been. The rifle slams into his shoulder, into the ever-present bruise, and two of them crumple.

He looks up past the viewfinder, desperate—

A weight crashes into him, sends him sprawling into the sand with a grunt.

"Harry," a familiar voice says. Tom's wide palms cup around his jaw, his face, pushing his cap off, grabbing his shoulders as if to affirm it's really him. "Jesus christ, it's you, what the hell are you doing here?"

Of all things, Harry feels a sob catch in his throat. "Tom," is all he can croak, the weight of the word enough to have his head dropping into the crook of his neck, sweaty and sandy but still familiar.

Harry breathes him in, lets Tom's fingers dig into his side, his biceps, frantic and painful.

"Your voice," Tom says, amazed and Harry can't help but laugh as he nods, eyes shining.

“Yeah.” In the midst of all of this chaos, Harry somehow feels shy, a little nervous for Tom to hear this new, fledgling part of him.

Tom's fingers stroke over his cheekbones, the burst shrapnel scar near his scalp, and he breaks into a smile. "It's beautiful. You're beautiful."

Their foreheads press together. From this angle, Tom's long eyelashes look suspiciously wet, two gleaming black commas in the pale hollows of his eyes. Harry wants to taste, but then

Tom's fingers begin to tremble from where they cup his cheeks and it's all he can do to wrench his hands up to cover them, feeling unfamiliar calluses on the familiar fingers.

A string of harsh, unfamiliar consonants ring out and the the ground beside them erupts, soil spitting out and spraying their legs.

The world bleeds back in, the screams and smoke and danger.

What is he doing? This is no place for softness.

“Come on,” Harry shouts over the noise. “They’re leaving, we have to go!”

Tom snaps out of his shock. He nods, his mouth a thin line as they scramble up to standing. His hand finds Harry’s and he starts to pull him, leading a strange, twisting path out of the base.

It’s the mines, Harry realises immediately. He knows where they are.

Tom lets go to shoot, and then he’s back to grabbing hold of Harry, leading them in a dance over strewn bodies and uneven ground.

Hazy in the distance, the rest of the soldiers shimmer into view as they crawl soberly over the flat landscape. They've been reformed into a shaky order by the officers, and even from here it's obvious that they're missing a hell of a lot of equipment. It's a good thing some of it had already been sent ahead earlier in the morning, or Harry is pretty sure the Germans would be celebrating a whole lot harder.

They manage to use the tanks as cover, slowing to a gradual stumble at the back as soon as it's safe to stop sprinting and weaving. The soldiers won't chase them; it's an obvious retreat, and their focus will be the base they’ve just acquired rather than picking off any stragglers who have already escaped.

Harry goes dizzy as the adrenaline dissipates. He’s shaking, his hand gripped so tightly around Tom’s that it can’t be pleasant.

“I can’t believe you’re here,” he says, winded by their run.

Tom shakes his head and slows their pace. “You enlisted,” he says. “What the hell are you doing here, Harry?”

Harry can’t keep the smile off his face, even though Tom looks half-way to anger. “I came to find you.”

“You’re what, *seventeen*?” he says, but then ends up smiling too, despite himself. “Were you always this reckless?”

Harry presses his fingers into the scars on Tom’s shoulders. “I think so.”

Tom snorts. “I suppose you’re right.” He hasn’t once looked away from Harry’s face. Harry wonders if it’s changed since he was fifteen and gangly and a child.

They rejoin the men and their hands slip. They walk close though, so close their shoulders brush, fingers touch.

It’s quiet. Now that they're not at immediate risk of death, he doesn't quite know what to say. It's too enormous, it's so huge and fragile that it could crush him. How does he communicate the relief, the joy he feels? Language is too blunt a tool.

Tom presses his bottle into his hand. “Drink something,” he says.

Harry takes it, confused, before he realises he must have dropped his own during the retreat.

His fingers twitch and jerk from the battle, but he manages to get the cap off and take a long, thirsty pull. He forces himself to stop with just a few swallows. It tastes like chlorine tablets, but he's so used to the bitterness that he barely grimaces anymore.

"Thanks.”

Tom just nods, reholstering it. He’s moves on from Harry’s face. Now he studies the rest of him, eyes skirting the sharp angles of his shoulders, the blood splatter on his left trouser leg, the smear of mud and ash around his neck.

Harry watches him too. Tom's grown surprisingly tall, all long legs and broad shoulders. Harry can still see the old him in the thinness of his wrists, the way he cocks his head to listen. But there’s a difference now, in the way he holds himself.

He’s… predatorial. *Danger*, Harry’s brain whispers. *Watch him.*

There’s a thin scar now, too, on his left jaw, close enough to his windpipe that Harry feels an unfamiliar flash of rage. He reaches up and touches before he can really stop himself, dropping his hand when Tom goes still.

"How did you get it?" he asks, embarrassed for some reason, at the way Tom's eyes have gone dark and hungry.

"Training," Tom tells him. “It was a long time ago.”

A little thrill skips down Harry’s spine at the way he smiles.

"Are they still alive?" he jokes.

Tom’s smile grows wider and Harry raises his eyebrows.

“What?” Tom says.

Harry snorts. “Were you always this reckless?”

Chapter End Notes

GOD FINALLY that was so satisfying to write

merge

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

They make it back to Mersa Bréga sweaty and exhausted, having walked all day without stopping to eat. Night has fallen, wrapped itself around the desert like a smug bath of darkness, and they can hear the sea panting rhythmically against the shore. They're told to set up camp in the pitch black, men grumbling and wolfing down food where they can.

Harry is lucky: even with the unexpected influx of infantry, Tom has his tent set up for him in it's own little space away to the left of the enlisted men. After they've managed to sequester a meal they don't waste any more time, stealing in, closing the entrance curtain and falling into each other. Harry's dead on his feet, covered in grime and swaying but it's like he's not in control anymore. He can't help himself; whatever thin veneer of civility that has been wrapped around him in public shatters as soon as Tom strips off his shirt, wincing as it sticks to all the tiny, cumulative abrasions of the last week. Delicate on his neck, the metal of the locket glints, peeking out from the shelter of his clavicle.

Harry stills as he notices, can't help but smile as he realises that Tom's worn it all this time.

Tom grins, following the line of Harry's eyes, and reaches back to take it off but Harry stops him with a hand to his arm.

"I don't need it back," he says softly, and Tom nods, stepping closer.

"I'd feel weird without it," he admits, fingers reflexively creeping up to hold the pendant. There's a moment where they regard each other, a delicate, quivering slice of time and then Tom seems to snap.

He uses his height to his advantage and backs Harry into the tiny bed, prowling forward until Harry's knees hit the mattress and he crumples, falling backwards. Tom lunges forward, won't stop pressing little hot hungry kisses everywhere - across the thin skin of Harry's bruised eyelids, down his collarbones to where his pulse flutters like a dying bird in the hollow of his throat.

"How did you know I was still alive?" Tom gasps out quietly into his neck, a shuddering laugh of joy.

Harry couldn't stop his hands running over every available inch of skin even if he wanted to. There's something hot and light and effervescent bubbling up in his throat, and he feels his eyes grow wet even though he's the furthest thing away from sad he could possibly be. It feels like something has been returned to him - a fundamental piece that's been a missing ache for years, and he feels so fucking *light*.

"I'd know," Harry whispers into his ear, resolutely. It's true. "If you died, I'd know," he says fingering his initials, beautifully contrasted against Tom's unexpected tinge of sunburn. There are a few freckles dotting the wide flat expanse at the top of his back, just visible in the moonlight, and Harry can't quite believe something so lovely is underneath him, is real and breathing, blood bringing oxygen to all those cells and synapses, and it's so perfect that he half wants to treasure it, half wants to destroy it.

He can't stop the impulse and his nails dig a little harder into Tom's back. He feels the skin give way, feels that hungry thing inside him shriek with glee. Tom bites down on his collarbone, hard in retaliation, and Harry can't help the noise that runs out of his mouth.

He has just enough time to vindictively hope it scars before Tom is moving, twisting Harry's wrists together above him in a tight grip. He can't move, pinned underneath the other boy in a parody of the first day they met. Tom's body blankets his, squeezing the air from his lungs, and Harry wants to suffocate under it until he can't breathe. Two huge, black eyes stare down at him, coaxing him in until Harry starts to flush with heat, squirming under the intensity of the stare as the other boy studies him.

He's not as in control as he's trying to pretend, Harry notices with glee, shifts his hips slightly so they align with where he can feel the length of the other, hard and hot, grinds up a little. Tom hisses, pulling his arms just a little higher, until the pain burns.

It suddenly feels like they're back in their tiny room in the orphanage, lazily experimenting with each other as teenagers, like simultaneously nothing's changed but everything has. Harry has this strange, heart-breaking feeling like it's all going to shatter, and all of a sudden there's an inexplicable sense of urgency lying heavily in the air around them.

"Come on," Harry urges, trying to free his hands so he can pull the other boy in. Tom lets him, releasing his bound hands.

"You're perfect," Tom decides, almost like he can't quite believe it, before he leans down and covers Harry's mouth with his own.

Harry gasps into the kiss, lips burning, trying to convey how much he wants this, how he needs to have this reassurance, this physical proof that they're finally together, skin-to-skin. Tom lets him, pushing his knee between Harry's legs so he can grind down on the weight of it, gives in to the frantic need for more and allows it to consume him.

Then Tom pulls back, mouth hovering tantalisingly closely, millimetres away, just enough so that Harry can feel him, warm and perfect above him, but can't move, can't get what he wants. He grunts in frustration, bucking up as he tries to get back to Tom's lips only to be pinned down again.

"Mine, Harry," Tom demands, cruelly lower lip just catching Harry's, "you're mine, you've always been-'"

"Yours, Tom, I'm yours, yours," Harry's half aware he's saying, before Tom's mouth is back on his and he can't think anymore.

Quick, clever fingers, so good at dismantling mines and guns and men, slip under trousers, tug them down. Harry's kicks them off, hands greedily searching out for Tom's own and yanking. Tom groans into his mouth as Harry's hands find him. He's not as weak as he once was, even though Tom is still larger than him; the years in the war have left him lean and lithe. He waits until Tom's hips are following the motion of his hand before releasing him and quickly using his strength to flip their positions, until Tom is half beneath him, gazing up like he's fascinated, greedily commits to memory the way Tom's cheeks are flushed, hair mussed and lips slick.

"I won't let you go again," Harry tells him, hand trailing over his throat. Tom stretches his head back, displaying the pale column of his neck, eyes half lidded and intent on him.

Harry widens his grip and puts the faintest pressure on his windpipe, and to his surprise Tom allows it, does this beautiful little roll of his hips that has Harry gasping, distracted. It's all the break Tom needs - he lunges up until they're face to face, with Harry balanced on his lap before suddenly he's looming over him, pressing tiny bites into the space just behind his jaw, below his ear.

"I wouldn't let you," Tom hisses, grin wild, and Harry can't stop the shuddering little sounds that escape his mouth each time he bites down.

He gets out a laugh, preens as Tom's hands run across his body, feeling where he's changed, the heat of his bare skin. There's this horrible, filthy need inside him, to get even closer, and Harry dives into it, tongue slipping into Tom's mouth, reaches down again to where they're both hot and slick, leaking already, and wraps a hand around them both. They groan together, and for a second Harry thinks he might finish then and there, arousal rushing through him like a dizzying, burning fire at the sound Tom makes, how his dark eyes swallow him up, pupils almost splitting the blue.

"Harry," Tom breathes, "you--"

He can feel the pressure building, in the base of his spine, gaze catching on the way Tom's large hands are gripping the sheets next to his head as he holds his weight up, how his hips start to stutter, bruising weight inching down on Harry as he gets closer and closer. Tom bites out his name again, and it's enough, it's all he needs to tip over the edge, feel his body melt like butter as blood rushes through him, the pain so sweet, so sweet and heady.

*

Afterwards, when they're both warm and sated, Harry hums as Tom trail his fingertips across his chest, enjoys the prickle of goosebumps that rise up with his touch. Tom is curled into him, pressing him down, and Harry's mind drifts peacefully.

They don't talk about the war. There's no need to - they both know what they've had to do, who they've had to become. Instead, Tom tells him about where he's been: the view of the sea

from the boat, how the dawn goes honey gold when you're that far out to sea, and the blue is like a blanket, as far as the eye can see. He tells Harry about Morocco, where he went at first, about the hot spices and the dusty souks, and wild, hissing cats and the green, clever little lizards that patter across the ceiling when the stars are bright at night.

Harry can't hold himself back, soft and sleepy with Tom wrapped around him like chainmail, whispering words into the shell of his ear like particularly persuasive smoke. He talks about Bisker and Thompson, about what happened last year in the storm in his tent, and sees Tom bare his teeth in a snarl, body stiff. He lets Tom hold him tighter, and smiles when he tells him how they died. Tom huffs out a pleased laugh when Harry tells him about the cliff edge, and how *easy* it was.

"I wish I had been there," he murmurs into Harry's hair, "I would have killed them for you."

Harry chuckles, "I know you would have," he agrees, squirming closer, although they're so intertwined it's not really possible.

"I hope they died hurting," Tom says after a pause, and when Harry glances up it's to see a faraway look in his eyes.

He pokes a finger into the soft skin of Tom's armpit, smiling as he squirms away. "They did," Harry promises simply.

Tom's grin grows as he leans down to kiss him.

Chapter End Notes

was that a whole chapter without anybody dying?? *pats self on the back*

almost normal

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The next week passes all too quickly. Logistically, the men at the base still have a lot of work to do. Their small settlement now has twice the men to cater for... and then there's the whole German issue. If they attack again, they now don't have the tanks to hold them off. They're sitting ducks, but there's nothing anyone can do about it until the higher ups decide on a plan.

Harry… Harry almost hopes they never will.

It's only due to the nature of this purgatorial period of waiting around that he and Tom get to snatch so much time together, naked in the desert heat, limbs stickily entangled.

But, of course, unlike Harry, Tom actually has responsibilities. There are meetings he has to attend, sometimes for whole mornings or afternoons, and then there's mandatory time spent with the men, listening to their issues, checking they're taking care of their equipment.

To his relief, Harry soon realises that nobody actually cares that their sergeant is suddenly toting around a skinny teenager from another platoon. His relationship with his unit is vastly different from Harry's own sergeant. They don't crack jokes, or invite him for a drink and a cigarette. Instead, they all shut up when he walks over, sit up straight with their ears pricked. The most Harry gets, watching from a few feet away, are a couple of curious glances.

Psycho Sarge, Harry muses. Apparently he earned the nickname extracting information out of the POWs that were unlucky enough to get captured.

"Everyone breaks under Riddle," someone had said.

It gives his unit a bit of a reputation, albeit a dark one. But a reputation like that isn't a bad thing in a place like this. And, really, whatever he's doing, Tom ends up drawing attention. It was the same back in London. Harry watches him walk across the base, prowling like some inhuman creature that's materialised in the middle of the hot sand and death. It's in the way his eyes are too dark, too steady. The way he doesn't blink when his gaze finds Harry and he changes direction.

There's a part of him that finds it scary. That realises that what they have, what they're doing, it's not healthy. It's obsession, possession, all those things that shouldn't be in any kind of functioning relationship, and certainly not to this degree.

And it shows itself in the odd separation anxiety he's managed to develop.

He's fine for an hour or two. But then his stomach starts to hurt, and his hands will shake, and that familiar, empty fear will seep in and only evaporate once Tom is there, in front of him, when he can hear his voice, feel his warm hands on his skin.

He hates it. But at the same time… he *needs* Tom. Needs his soft, hot lips and calloused fingers, his amused chuckle, the way he pulls Harry's hair when they kiss.

And yes, it makes him feel like some pining, pathetic teenager. But deep down, in a dark corner of his mind that he doesn't like to visit, he's scared this is all some sick hallucination. It may be a symptom of the war, but nothing feels quite real anymore. A row of tiny red smudges track down his arms now, bruised capillaries from how hard he pinches himself.

Tom is no help with this. In fact, he encourages it. Every time he sees Harry sitting outside, scanning the crowds at the base, he smiles. Every time Harry grabs hold of him, pulls him into their tent, trembling, he gets this soft, pleased look, coos over how needy he is. And over every bruise, every mark on Harry's body, he places his own on top, sucks his skin until the blood rushes to the surface, replaces everything that isn't Tom's.

Yeah, Harry thinks. They're just as bad as each other.

*

It's five o'clock in the morning, exactly seven days after the ambush. The base is quiet for once, as if by unspoken mutual agreement they've all decided on what counts for a lie-in these days, trusting the sentries and the scouts to do their jobs.

A light breeze lifts up the sand outside Tom's tent and rhythmically sprays it across the material: a desert tide. Shifting chinks of morning light filter sleepily through, like they're under some vast, shadowed canopy. Harry dozes gently, warm and comfortable from where he's nestled up against Tom, enjoying the fingers carding lazily through his hair.

He doesn't really remember what they were talking before, or even if they were talking at all, lulled into a half-sleep by the feeling of Tom's thumb pressing delicious little circles into the ache of his temple. But the feeling of contentment stills a little as the hand falls from its clever massage of Harry's head to his throat, touch whispering against his Adam's apple.

"Tell me how this happened," Tom murmurs, stroking his throat. His voice is soft and warm like the air around them.

Harry's eyes creak open. He stares into the dark shadows of the tent ceiling, tastes the dawning heat in the stuffy interior as he draws a breath. Tom waits, patiently, as Harry think about what to say.

He doesn't want to shatter the moment, but Tom should know the truth. Lewis deserves it, if nothing else.

"There was a man—a friend," he corrects, before his mouth gets dry and he has to pause. It's crazy to think that Lewis' death was only a week ago, and suddenly he feels like a shitty person for not thinking of it more often, for letting himself get so utterly distracted.

Tom’s fingertips play on his arm, but he says nothing.

Harry sighs and keeps going, not bothering to try to scrub the grief from his words. “Lewis, his name was. The lieutenant asked us to retrieve a piece of equipment from some Italian lads that had nicked it and ran. So… we went out, we found them. I guess we, uh, we got cocky."

Lewis’ face veers up in his mind. How intent it had been as they'd crept up on the three boys, how quickly he’d moved across the sand. Trained to kill, like the rest of them.

"He was drunk. Probably. It doesn't matter. He grabbed onto one of them and he.” Harry’s stomach feels like lead, his tongue frozen. He sips in a breath. “One of the Italians stuck him with a knife. I watched him bleed out.”

“Harry,” Tom says. He shifts closer, as if to protect him against his own memory.

"I had to leave him there."

He turns and presses his face into Toms chest, listens to the regular, slow thump of his heart. He’s nostalgic suddenly; Tom would always hold him like this whenever he tripped or hurt himself as a kid, cradling away his pain and tears.

Another minute or so and Harry’s eyes grow dry. It still aches, when he thinks about Lewis, it’s still a weight. But somehow it feels lighter now.

Sleepy, he wriggles his way on top of Tom, arranges himself until his body is mapped onto the other boy's, limbs directly on top of limbs, face buried in the sleep-smell of his neck.

He dreams that he sinks down into Tom, becomes him, cells wetly popping into each other, colliding and merging into one fluid filled membrane. He dreams that the bloody mess of their circulatory systems unpick themselves from the bone like sputtering, stringed animals, spiders arms of veins wrapping into each other, tangling deeper and deeper until their hearts rejoin.

*

Later in the day, Harry finds himself standing near the ration line with Peters. He focuses on rolling his cigarette as they talk.

Neither of them mention the one name they have in common.

Harry lights his fag and sucks in the smoke. Ash trickles inside his lungs, and for a moment it tastes coppery and rotten, before the familiar tobacco takes over. He blinks: that’s new.

He breathes in. Breathes out. Watches the smoke curl in lazy waves from the heat, and dissipate into the peacock blue of the sky, feels the weight of something heavier than oxygen

stroking his throat.

Next to him, smoking his own cigarette, Peters snorts. Harry follows his gaze: Watford, a young lad from Birmingham, has just tackled old, grizzly Clocks to the ground.

“I think they’re in love,” Peters muses, and Harry can’t help but laugh.

“Yeah? I reckon they’re both just bloody idiots.”

Peter hums appraisingly, before shooting Harry an assessing glance. “I’d still bet five cigs on Watford you know.”

Harry watches the two tousle, an eight-limbed creature, and takes another drag of his cigarette. “Go on then.”

Peters holds out his hand to shake, and as Harry takes it he grabs hold of his fingers, draws him in to pound on his back.

“Christ,” Harry blurts as his cigarette falls out of his hand. He pushes the other man off him. “This how you make a bet in Glasgow?”

“Sorry,” Peters grins, “I forget you’re a little English princess sometimes.”

Harry gives him a sarcastic smile as he squats to fish his half-finished stick out the sand. It's already sputtered out, the weak orange glow replaced with a tombstone grey. He sighs, but deep down he’s pleased things seem to have gone back to normal between them—there are few people in the world who can watch you rip a man’s tongue out and still want to shake your hand.

“Oh go on then.” Peters holds out a freshly rolled cigarette.

Harry shrugs and takes it, as a cry sounds out.

They both turn. Young Watford has Clocks in a headlock.

“Shit,” Harry murmurs as Peters whoops.

As he hands over the cigarettes, the back of his neck prickles. He’s quick to spy the reason: from across the camp, Tom is staring.

He’s with three other men, who are in some sort of heated discussion, but Tom’s frown is directed squarely at Harry.

Harry raises his eyebrows, but Tom turns back to his companions.

Strange, Harry thinks, but his attention is diverted by Watford yelling as Clocks manages to flip their positions. There’s blood on his chin but he’s grinning triumphantly.

“Well,” Harry says, and turns to Peters who’s frozen in place. “Would you look at that.”

Peters opens his mouth but before he can say anything, someone else interrupts.

“Aren't you boys meant to be on patrol? I saw Johnson booting up.”

It’s another man from their unit, a grimy t-shirt tied around his head to protect it from the sun. It’s too late: his cheeks are already pink and peeling.

Peters and Harry frown at each other before Harry looks down at his watch.

“Oh shit,” he swears.

“What?”

“It’s three.”

Peters groans and looks forlornly at the rations tent, where the smell of cooked meat is drifting out, tantalisingly close.

“Fucks sake,” he swears, and then “come on.”

They both take off at a jog towards their patrol point.

“You can run faster than that!” their sergeant yells at them as they near. He’s a nice enough bloke though, so they probably won’t get written up for being late. He’s thankfully notoriously lazy with his paperwork.

It's a rather uneventful patrol, and they don't venture that far out. For the most part it’s just a bit of quiet walking, and occasionally veering off route if they see anything odd or interesting. Harry finds a little scrap of metal buried under the sand that he pockets, probably left over from the frenzied march over, but aside from that it's pretty bleak landscape. It's quite peaceful, to get away from the noise of their base and go exploring, and it feels good to stretch his legs even as the sweat pours down his back from the afternoon sun. His rifle is a black magnet of heat, hard and heavy, a worn groove over his shoulder.

Four hours later and the heat has dulled a little, just as they make it back to the camp, eager to wash the sand and grime from their faces. Peters has an arm wrapped around Harry's shoulders as they trudge back in, hot and tired, whispering how he's willing to bet a whole pack that Watford's going to be banging Clocks into the bedsheets and they're sure to catch them in the act if they go over to the tents tonight. Harry pointedly rolls his eyes and shrugs him off. It's too hot for human contact right now. All he wants is some cold, chlorinated water and to speak to Tom.

Speak of the devil, Harry thinks humorously. Tom is waiting for them, chatting to one of the supply clerks as Harry fills out his report and hands it in.

As soon as he starts to walk, Tom breaks off his conversation and catches up.

“Mine?” he asks as they walk side by side. “In fifteen?”

Harry nods, and then veers off in the direction of Tom's tent. Tom himself goes off in another direction, but Harry's too tired to question it.

Peters wolf whistles at him as he drops out of sight, breaking into laugher as Harry gives him the finger.

He sits outside Tom's tent to look at the stars as begins to clean his rifle. It's muscle memory at this point, and he takes his time, lets his mind go fuzzy and still. He only really surfaces when Tom reappears.

Harry almost tears up when he sees the canteen bowl in his hand.

Tom laughs as Harry takes it, and then looks distantly horrified at the speed at which he starts to shovel whatever it is—some kind of rice—into his mouth.

"Did you skip lunch?" Tom asks, disapproving.

"Yeah," he replies between bites, "forgot we had patrol."

Tom hums and leans back against the metal structure his tent is propped up against with his arms folded.

"Who was that man you were with?"

Harry pauses his eating, squinting up. "Who? Peters?" he chews.

"You seemed awfully close with him."

Harry considers his response.

Ah, he shouldn't. But Tom is so… so delightfully human like this. A flash of sunlight on the surface of an otherwise cold, dark sea.

"Maybe I am," he says.

Tom straightens up and stalks over to him. He looms, menacing. Harry thinks it's rather cute.

"You're making me want to hurt him," he says calmly.

Harry puts his bowl down. He does enjoy teasing Tom, but he also doesn't exactly want Peters to suffer for it.

"He's a friend," he says firmly. "He's the one that was with me when—with Lewis."

Tom watches him as he gets to his feet. "He's awfully touchy for a friend."

Harry takes the single step remaining between them, and cranes his neck until they're eye-to-eye. There's a lazy curl of hunger in Tom's gaze now.

His breathing halts, just for a brief second, as Harry skims his hand under his shirt, traces the lean, army-hardened muscles of his stomach.

“I’m yours,” he says into the lovely space between Tom's neck and his jaw, presses a kiss there, where the skin is thin and soft.

Tom’s arms wind around him, two bands of steel. Above him, he hears the deep rumble of Tom's small chuckle. “You are,” he says, and then ducks his head, nips at the skin of Harry own neck until he gasps. “And you’re also a manipulative shit.”

Harry tries not to laugh. “Inside?” he asks.

It’s not a good idea to do this kind of thing out in the open, however secluded their tent might be. In war people turn a blind eye to some questionable forms of legality, but to flaunt it overtly is just asking for trouble. They both know it; Tom grips the back of his head by the short curls of his hair, shoving him forward towards their tent. Harry hisses, but acquiesces, tugged along until they're ducking inside and Tom is pushing him down on the bed.

"Really," Harry dares, as Tom starts to unbutton his shirt, one hand flat on Harry's chest, pinning him to the mattress, "you must realise this is a terrible incentive."

Chapter End Notes

right well, this has been nice, hasn't it? *chuckles evilly*

a promise kept

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Harry can't breathe.

There's something lodged deep in his ribs and no amount of coughing will get it out. His eyes sting and his ears roar, so loudly, so *completely* that it must be coming from inside his head.

"Mum?" he wheezes, the word small. "Dad?"

There's nothing but a horrible silence, and the ringing in his head.

He crawls out of bed and stares. Red fog pours though the crack under his door, squeezing through and rising up like the sea. Panic settles over him, grips his muscles so that he can only blink, stupefied as his bedroom begins to burn.

He fights it.

"Mum!" he screams.

His door becomes a wall of fire. The flames are angry and orange. They latch onto his wardrobe until the wood curls with melted cotton. Harry runs over to the part of the door that isn't alive and goes to touch the doorknob. But the tears that fall from his cheeks sizzle as they hit the metal and he's forced to back away.

He realises, with a cold sort of knowing, that he's going to die.

"Help me!" he screams again, terrified, as a wave of dizziness turns his vision fuzzy.

But of course, nobody answers.

The window, he suddenly remembers. He leaps on his bed and tugs at the latch with all his strength, trying to pull it up. But it doesn't budge. It's painted shut—they live in a 'nice house in a rough part of London' as mum always says. No need for it ever to be opened.

He cries in frustration, great snotty sobs, and bangs on the panes with his fists, smearing the condensation.

It's futile. His arms grow weaker and weaker, and his head spins faster and faster. He draws his knees up, pressed against the warm glass, making himself as small as possible. His bed is a tiny island in a sea of heat.

He stares at the moon outside, apathetic to his plight, and begs.

I don't want to die. Not like this.

*

Harry sucks in a breath, nearly gagging with the pain. It feels like broken glass is lining is throat, and he coughs and coughs to get it out.

He's disoriented, confused—why is he floating?

An uncomfortable pressure digs into his stomach, and it takes him a good few seconds to realise it’s a shoulder, and that his head is aching because he’s upside down and all the blood's rushed into his face.

Adult voices weave together. People are shouting.

The pressure leave suddenly as two large hands wrap under his armpits and he’s set down on his feet. His legs don’t seem to be working though, and he almost crumples to the ground, saved at the last second by the man in front of him.

“Woah there,” a gruff voice tells him. “Take it easy kid.”

He blinks up, lost and afraid. It’s a policeman, which in itself it terrifying. Harry’s vaguely scared of policemen—his mum always said they’d come to take him away if he didn’t tidy his room.

“What?” he tries to say but his voice won’t work.

The policeman’s eyes soften and he kneels down. He doesn’t seem to care that the freezing brown slush of the street gets on his nice shiny boots.

Why is he doing that? Harry wonders. Is he dreaming?

"It's alright, son. Look at me, it's alright now. You're alright," the policeman says.

Harry coughs weakly. *My parents?* he mouths.

The man looks pained. He casts around before someone, a lady in a blue uniform, hands him a bottle of water. Harry takes it from him with both hands, and tries to sip it slowly. He's so thirsty but it hurts and his entire mouth tastes like coal.

Within the first two gulps his mind starts to switch back on, and he realises he's outside. The sky a strange blackish-red with no stars. The noise isn't just in his ears, there is indeed a wall of sound behind him, and light, as bright as the sun.

His heart in his stomach, Harry turns towards it.

He shakes his head, mute with horror. His house, his entire street, is burning.

His breath disappears and he starts to panic. There's pain, where he pinches himself, but it has to be a dream. This is just a nightmare, isn't it?

"Look at me, lad," the policeman says, but Harry's no idiot. He turns to where he's not supposed to.

They're carrying stretchers. Stretchers with mounds of fabric piled up on top, that look almost like—

Harry's gaze falls to the blackened hand, the tarnished wedding ring that his Dad has never taken off, and promptly turns around to puke up last night's spaghetti.

The policeman grips him to his side, so tight that it hurts, but Harry doesn't know what to say, how to speak. It's like the words get stuck coming up and then he catches sight of the lump under the sheets again, and then he doesn't know what the words even are.

He only remembers once he's sitting on the hard wooden chair at the social services office, waiting for the lady behind the desk to get off the phone.

He'd put bread in the oven. He'd put it in there, turned it on, and then heard the heavy footsteps of his father on the stairs and bolted, cheek still stinging from the last slap. He'd lain in bed, hiding under the covers, waiting for them to stop shouting so he could go downstairs… but his eyes, they'd been so hot and tired, and his pillow had been so soft under his head—

Harry throws up again.

The woman puts the phone down and fusses with a shrill voice, hauls him to a cold white bathroom to clean up. But he can't pay much attention as she dabs at his trousers.

Because its his fault, isn't it? His mum, his dad, their house… it's all his fault.

The blackened hand. The creaking skeleton of his house, swaying, ash raining around them like dove-grey snow.

The woman's grip on his arm hurts as she pulls him from the room, into the corridor, and Harry tries to pull away. But when he looks up, the woman's face has disappeared, and there's just a sticky black skull instead, staring down at him reproachfully—

"Come on love, *move*!"

Harry heaves awake.

There's no skull. It's Tom's face filling his vision, Tom's fingers digging into his shoulder, shaking him, eyes black and wide with fear.

"We've got to go, come on," he says.

Harry is yanked to his feet. Tom thrusts his boots at him and grabs his rifle.

“What the hell is going on?” he shouts over the sound of gunfire. He starts pulling on his boots on autopilot, still feeling sick from his dream.

He understands when the whole earth shakes beneath them. Hard chunks of rain patter harshly over the roof of the tent, and Harry wakes up a little bit more, and realises it's not a storm. It's an explosion.

They're being bombed.

“Shit,” he swears and it seems Tom’s patience evaporates as he pulls them out of the tent and into chaos.

It’s night time but the sky burns, and all around them people are screaming. Harry sees legs a few metres away, tangled up and ownerless like a purple twisted wishbone, and once again feels that deadening calm descend on him like morphine. It's war, and when light and heat and sound explode into existence around you, comets falling from above, those that survive run cold, not hot.

But that skull. He keeps seeing it with every blink, and now the smoke and the flames are real. He stumbles, keeps tripping as Tom pulls him along, running from the tide of ruthless enemy planes.

“Get it together,” Tom tells him, panicking, and Harry struggles to obey.

“Where are we going?” he shouts as they step over a man dying on the ground.

The soil a meter away explodes with a high whine, and something cuts his cheek, a little slice of searing pain.

“Here!” Tom screams and hauls him to the side, past the row of burning soldiers, over the twisted, burnt metal.

Harry half-limps half-runs, frantically casting around for the rest of his unit, the men he's spent years with. He can't see them through the desert smoke, can only pray and hope to hell that they're getting out. There's no doubt in his mind that the Italian infantry will be scurrying forward, armed to the teeth as soon as the air attack stops.

They're lucky. Tom's tent is on the edge of the base, further inland, and it’s given them a head start, but it still doesn’t mean they’re safe. If they're spotted from above—easy enough in this bleak, monolithic landscape—they'll be gunned down within seconds.

Tom stares at Harry. The whites of his eyes gleam out from a face covered with dirt and sweat. They’re both thinking the same thing: if they run they could be killed for desertion. But if they stay… well, then they already dead.

“We run for it,” Harry says. “The tributary.”

Tom nods as they sprint again. There’s a small river a mile or so away and if they can make it there they should at least have a path to rejoin the main base.

Their feet slide and slip, dust coughing into their lungs as they fling themselves towards it. A few of the other lads follow, scurrying low. It's only when he sees them, gripping their rifles like a safety blanket, that Harry realises he's left his own behind.

*

Somehow, they make it to the river bank, crawling on their bellies like pale snakes along the warm desert ground. The night occasionally flashes an eerie green from the sporadic boom of shells, but aside from that it's quiet, the sand whispering with the wind.

Harry doesn't know why he stops. But something deep in his gust twists, and he grabs hold of Tom's sleeves.

Tom looks concerned. "What is it?" he whispers, eyes flitting over Harry's body. "Are you hurt?"

Harry shakes his head. He doesn't know how to explain it. "Something's wrong," he says.

"What?"

"I don't know… it's just—it's too quiet."

Tom frowns but he looks around.

They both spot it the same time. A flash of bright light, too close to be one of the shells, and then a soldier further downstream howls.

All of them, a dozen deserted soldiers, freeze immediately. They all look around at each other with the same expression of *what the fuck was that*, and then when the guy howls again Harry grabs Tom and pulls him down without thinking twice.

"Bombers!"

He's too late. The earth is wrenched from beneath his feet, and noise explodes around him, so loud and deep that he can't see, doesn't know which way is up.

For a moment he's airborne, weightless, and the world disappears into a blur, and then the hard ground rises up to meet him. The sand, as soft as it looks, does nothing but shear off a layer of skin as he skips across the dune like a stone on water.

Harry opens his eyes. He doesn't know how much time he's lost, all he knows is that he's slipping, something earthy and wet in his mouth as his hands scrabble for purchase.

He's slipping into the river.

He throws out an arm and grabs hold of a small, twisted tree halfway down the slop, mutilated by it's thirst, and manages to come swinging to a stop.

He coughs the mud from his mouth and wheezes. His ribs ache like he’s been stepped on by a giant, and he has that awful moment of having to take stock of his body, feel for all his limbs, make sure he's not leaking blood. There are scrapes from the rocks all up his side, and his knee has a nasty gash but other than that he's fine.

He crawls up to where the land flattens out and looks around for Tom. A spray of bullets lights up the ground next to him and he dives away, muffling the scream.

They're caught. From his vantage point, he sees men with guns approaching. The planes hum like fat mosquitoes above.

Where is Tom?

He sees a lump to his left, a few metres away, and his heart almost stops before he sees blonde hair spilling out from the red pool.

There’s no guilt to the relief he feels that it’s not Tom.

Just on from the dead blonde boy he catches sight of an arm sticking out of the sand, a graceful curve tapering to a thin wrist. The rest is obscured by the sand and the dead boy and Harry doesn't even think about the bullets, lunges forward on his hands and knees until he can grab it.

It’s Tom alright, half buried under the sand.

Harry pulls him out and turns him over, trying to diagnose. How much of that blood is his? He doesn’t get the chance to find out. Rough Italian breaks through the air, barked out so loudly it reaches him from a good twenty meters away.

Harry stares at the river. He has three seconds to make his choice. They’re trapped, an easy target from above, and now there’s only one way they really can go.

Into the water.

He grits his teeth and drags Tom's body back down the bank, watching the current rush. Someone else's pack lies discarded nearby so Harry grabs ahold and tries to manoeuvre Tom on top. They start to slide down the bank into the water. It’s not clean, this river. It’s a translucent brown, clogged with dirt and sand and probably the worst thing to enter if Tom is wounded as badly as Harry is trying not to think about.

But at least it’s better than a bullet.

Harry slides in feet first, trying to direct Tom so that his torso remains clear. It’s all but useless, he immediately begins to sink and so Harry is forced to press him to his chest and lie on his back to keep him afloat. Water goes up his nose, in his mouth, but they’re moving, finally, pushed along away from the gunfire and the blood.

The bank shrinks away and Tom is silent.

He was always like this, Harry consoles himself, he never made any sounds when they caned him at Wool's. He's too stubborn for his own good, and if he's honest, Harry is thankful. He's held together with paper chains and if he had to hear Tom screaming he'd doesn't know what he wold do.

The other boy's limbs are a sprawling wet weight pressing down on him, and river midges begin to collect, attracted by the blood seeping out of his stomach. Harry ignores their biting, doesn't even try to wave them away. The current here is fast and uncaring, pushing them ever closer to the corner.

Harry doesn't believe in God, not really, but he prays then. *Please, no Germans, no Italians.*

It must be thirty minutes that they're in there before he spies figures on the bank.

Above them, the sky is breaking into a pearly, half-hearted dawn and the stars begin to shiver blue in the distance. The morning light plays over the surface of the water like a thin white wine.

Harry's hand flip red and white in a carousel as water and blood battle it out. He's half-drowned at this point, breathing in as much horrid, salty water as warm dry air, but he forces his shaking limbs to keep them going, afloat, fingers trembling like a butterfly as they press the cloth harder. Tom's blood slips quietly, constantly, into the water like ink onto a page, and Harry longs with every fibre of his being, hard and deep enough to move the stars to pity, for time to reverse, for him to have had his middle ripped apart instead.

But no. His task is to keep them alive. For one more minute, he tells himself. And when that passes, another minute. He's surprised they're not already at the sea by this point—the tributary must be twisting and weaving through the arid land for it to be taking this long

He's all but given up when he sees the nomads.

They shimmer, mirage-like on the bank of the river, and for a moment he thinks they're soldiers, and he strains to make out their uniform. But as they're whisked closer, he realises: there are no uniforms. Instead, they're dressed in the pale, ragged cotton that Harry has become accustomed to seeing occasionally in the towns they pass.

Behind them, a little way out, are a couple of children and six camels, laden down with leather bags, bright cloth and carved clay objects that he doesn't recognise.

The two children stop playing, standing as stationary as two little meerkats, heads pricked up attentively, watching.

Harry opens his mouth and gathers his last remaining strength.

"Help!" he screams.

Chapter End Notes

let's all agree to ignore my questionable a) science b) geography c) knowledge of the military, thanks!

no gods now

Chapter Notes

> don't usually do TWs but pls be aware there is a brief description of self harm in this chapter!

It’s not god who saves them, it’s luck, although maybe they’re the same thing.

The men slide into action at Harry’s yell. One of them wades down the bank to hold out a hand.

Harry tries desperately to steer himself closer, nails scratching at the wet rock as he uses it as leverage.

The river spins quickly, and for a moment Harry thinks they might just miss each other. And then the man in the water reaches out with a grunt and yanks hold of his arm.

He has to pull hard to manoeuvre the weight of two, albeit starved, men, and Harry almost faints from the way it put the wrong kind of pressure on his shoulder socket.

But then the other men are there, solemn faced and curious, and they’re both being hauled up the bank to dry land.

“Careful,” Harry chokes, fighting the arms around him. “He’s injured, his—his stomach.”

The men talk to each other in a language that sounds nothing like the Arabic that Harry knows, but they’re a touch more gentle as they carry Tom by his arm and legs.

Harry heaves himself to his hands and knees, his whole body shaking like he's run a marathon.

“Doctor,” he tries. “Please, we can pay, he needs a doctor.”

The men stop talking and stare at him with dark, impassive eyes. The lower half of their faces are obscured by the shifts of faded linen and it makes him feel uncomfortable.

There are eight people here. Four men, two women and two children.

He ignores them all as he scrambles over to where they put Tom. He hovers over him, unsure if his face is wet from the river or from his tears, gently moving his wet, black hair out of the way.

“Hey,” he trembles, “wake up. You’re ok, right? Come on love wake up for me.”

But Tom is still and pale and quiet. The only movement is the tiny rise and fall of his chest.

One of the older men squats down on cracking knees and passes him a scarf. Harry takes it with a fumbled "*shukran*,"and uses it to mop up the blood. It shifts the sodden slap of material away from Tom's torso, and he almost throws up when he sees the wound.

It's bad.

It's really bad. Tom's stomach has a large, deep gash in it, organs peeking through the skin. Harry's no stranger to wounds like this, but it feels like he's looking at someone he doesn't know all of a sudden. It's the only way he can rationalise it, because he knows—

Wounds like this you don't come back from.

The old man clicks his tongue against yellow teeth and rattles something off to the onlookers. Another crouches, grabs the compress out of his hand, clicking his teeth.

He's helpless. He has no idea what the man is saying, but allows his wrist to be moved and withdraws the shaky pressure he had on Tom's stomach. The strangers crowd around him, talking to each other in quiet, pitted voices.

One of them beckons over a child, who approaches with a leather water pouch clasped shyly to her chest. She watches with big eyes as the man squirts a small amount of their precious drinking water over the wound. His hand goes into his pocket, and then to his mouth, and before Harry can stop him he's spitting something pulpy and green into his palm and pressing it to Tom's stomach.

"Oh god," he mumbles, but there's nothing he can do. What's the point in stopping them? Maybe it will help.

Tom's wound is wrapped in more cloth, and then he's carefully lifted to sit in front of one of the men on a large camel. The man grips him to hold him into place, and grabs the reign.

Harry gets to his feet so fast he nearly faints. "Wait," he says, terrified, "where are you taking him?"

The girl from before tugs on his arm. She can't be more than ten and she's missing teeth.

"Come," she says in an accent. "Come, come."

The rest of them are tightening the straps of their bags, hauling themselves up to ride. The girl leads him over to the camel at the back, a huge, smelly beast that kneels rather begrudgingly for him to manoeuvre himself on. It's mouth is thick with foamy saliva, it's beautiful eyes bright brown.

As the camel plods along, Harry bites his lip bloody with worry. His eyes stay fixed on the edges of Tom's limbs he can see peeking out from where he's propped up by another.

Have I killed him, he wonders, *does the jostling of the ride mean he's already dead?*

They don't follow the river, the nomads. Instead, they cut a perpendicular path into the desert, riding out into the endless dirty beige until there's nothing else on the horizon: a terrible, arid ocean.

The children begin to chatter, pointing, and Harry ignores the pain in his knee, the headache, the sickness from the growing heat, pushing through his exhaustion to scan the horizon. Soon enough, something differentiates itself.

For a moment he can't work it out. It looks like an upside down U, like a large arch in the middle of the desert. As they near it, he thinks it might be a ruin. The stone is old and half-crumbled, its edges smoothed by time and sandstorms. There's a small dark square on the ground next to it.

The pit of his stomach draws up as they stop, next to it. Like this, the archway towers above, the size of a house.

He almost starts weeping. Tom will die here. This is no hospital. There is no doctor. They've been bought here as some kind of sick joke, some way to punish the foreigners who are fighting a battle in a land they have no right to be in.

The men are quick to dismount, and they take Tom between them again in the same hold as last time.

"Wait," Harry cries, struggling to get down. The camel snorts as he fusses, pawing at the earth. "Stop, where are you taking him?"

"Come," the little girl says again as he manages to jump down, knees nearly buckling.

He's beginning to think it's the only english word she knows.

"Where?" he begs.

Tom and the men have disappeared into that strange dark square. There are steps leading down, steep and shadowy.

He doesn't think twice. He hobbles down them, straining his eyes in the darkness. He can hear them speaking their language again, just up ahead.

Surprisingly, when they reach the end of the stairs, it's not completely pitch black. Light shines in from up ahead. He follows it, and comes to a small cavern.

Light falls down in dusty shards from high above, where the rock has been dug out to form a tunnel up to the surface. Huge slabs of white stone have been built into the rock face, and reflect just enough to throw the space into dappled illumination. In the middle of the stone floor is a strange marble altar. It looks ancient, carved with half-eroded pictures and letters.

It's one of the most unlikely things Harry has ever seen, but he doesn't have time to marvel.

“What the hell are you doing?” he shouts as the men carry Tom over.

They ignore him, focused on settling their human cargo on the altar. Tom is so white and still that Harry’s heart stops beating.

One of the men turns to him. “You want heal?”

The fabric over his face has been pulled down to reveal a brown, leather-lined face, a beard peppered with white. A thin scar bisects his top lip and curves it in a mockery of a smile.

“Yes,” Harry says frantically, and then sobs, “but I don’t understand, he needs a *doctor*, not —”

“Doctor no help,” the man smiles. “Only this.”

Harry almost laughs in desperation. “Ok. If you can help him…”

The man wheezes out a cough, lungs sounding like a wet engine. “Come.”

Harry follows him across the stone to the altar. The world spins around him. He thinks he might have around five more minutes before he passes out. His hands shake as he stares down at Tom, and his eyes blur with tears that drip onto the floor. The white stone is already turning red.

Does he even have any blood left?

“I’m so sorry,” Harry tells Tom, and strokes his forehead. “I don’t know what to do, I—”

He cuts off when they pour a bottle of something into Tom’s mouth. It’s a woman this time, her fingers callused and tattooed around the tiny glass vial.

He doesn’t bother asking what it is. Either this will work or he’ll be dead anyway. All Harry wants to do is stay there and wait for him to open his eyes. He just wants one more look, that’s all.

A hand on his shoulder turns him. It’s the older man. He’s silent, reading Harry’s face with granite eyes like he’s looking for something. Harry can’t spare him more than a second before he’s back to staring at Tom, watching something red trickle out of his mouth.

Oh god. Have they given him blood?

Please be some form of morphine, Harry begs in his head.

“Sacrifice.”

The word comes out slow, whistled between gaps in the stranger’s yellow teeth.

“I don’t understand,” Harry tells him tiredly. He's run out of time. It’s obvious: Tom's breaths are getting softer, less regular, and the steady tap of his blood on the floor is beginning to slow.

The man holds something out towards him. Harry stares it.

A knife. It’s awful, serrated points gleaming like dark silver teeth.

For some reason he takes it.

The man nods. A bead of sweat drips down his temple, sneaking out from under his head wrapping. He wipes it away with the back of his fingers and says something to the others, who step back, nodding. They look serious now. Excited.

“He need blood,” the man says and gestures to Tom’s mouth. “More.”

Harry shakes his head. “What?”

The man mimes something that has Harry blanching; a slash over his wrist. “Blood,” the man repeats. There’s something strange about his eyes now. They’re… darker than they were before.

"You want *me* to bleed?"

“See.” The man's sweat-coloured sleeves run through Tom's blood as he reaches to gently touch his face, pale with death, the red liquid seeping into the cotton in beautiful blooms. "Nearly finish. Bleed."

His gnarled fingers grab onto the sun-stiff material of Harry's uniform, and push back his sleeve to reveal his forearm. Harry nearly shoves him back before pausing, staring at the white sheet of the skin on his arm, lying softly, belly up.

"Bleed," the man says again, a chant, and Harry turns to see that Tom’s face has strange marks painted on, marks that were not there just a moment ago. It looks like Arabic, black and flowing, covering every inch of available skin. He almost drops the knife in horror.

The man grins again but now both eyes are white-less, black and shiny. He can see himself in there, an ant-sized reflection, a terrified, gobsmacked boy.

Buzzing fills his ears in a low, soft, vibration, fills his head too, until he struggles to think at all.

All he can see are those black eyes, the black marks on Tom's soft skin, and the dangerously thin edge of the blade suddenly hovering a hair breadth away from his wrist.

He takes a deep breath in, fills his lungs with as much warm air as he can, until they burn, saturated, blocks of ice in his chest.

Is he really going to do this?

Why not, a voice purrs. *You don’t want to live without him anyway, do you?*

And there is something here. Something not human, something he doesn’t understand but has the hair standing upright on his arms, his heart racing.

“Now,” the man tells him, and Harry flicks his wrist without thinking twice.

Distantly, he is surprised that there’s no fear, as his skin parts red in a beautiful arch. No fear, just morbid curiosity. The buzzing in his ear swells and then begins to travel down his veins, into his fingertips, his toes, until it’s so loud and tight that his fingers flex, drop the knife.

It’s peaceful, for the first second.

And then the pain filters in, a horrible, hungry beast with a gaping, open mouth. Harry’s arm vomits blood as if in ecstasy, boiling hot and wet down his hands, all over whatever unnatural black ink has somehow materialised on Tom's face, his chest.

Harry’s heart rate slows to a sluggish clap, sarcastic applause.

Is this really how I die? he thinks. *In Libya, as a soldier, as the love of my life bleeds to death in front of me?*

What have I done for this?

He doesn't realise his knees have crumpled until suddenly he's looking up at the sky, always that same, horrible shade of bright blue. It takes monumental effort, but he turns his head.

The altar is red and gleaming. He follows it up, up to the body lying on top. Tom’s hand is so close to his, fingers lax. Harry wants to hold it but his muscles won’t obey him anymore.

I’m sorry, he tells Tom, as his gaze reaches his profile.

The last thing Harry sees before the world swallows him up, are two fluttering, red irises.

a dangerous red

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He wakes up to the feeling of hands stroking through his hair. It's a tiptoe into waking, limbs still loose and tongue soft. He rubs his cheek into the warmth underneath him, consciousness filtering in just enough to feel the ache thrumming throughout his whole body. It hurts, a deep, bone-weary ache, and although Harry tries desperately to sink back into sleep it seems his body has woken up and doesn't care.

The hands freeze as he lets out a little groan, before there's a gentle, questing touch at his jaw.

“Harry?” he hears.

He knows he’s frowning. He doesn’t want to get up. He wants to stay in the warm cocoon of Tom’s arms, in their tent, wants Tom to kiss away the awful, obliterating pain in his left arm —

That wakes him up.

What the hell has he done to his arm?

Harry’s eyes fly open. He's still disorientated, so the sight of the thick, ugly red scar sits blankly in his brain for a minute before the horror kicks in. He must make some kind of noise of distress, as suddenly Tom's face swims into his vision, blocking out the sight.

"Shh, shh, Harry,” Tom croons, cupping his cheeks with cold fingers. "It's ok, you're ok."

Harry gulps in air like he’ll never have it again. “What the hell’s happened?” he rasps, finally figuring out that he’s sitting propped up again Tom with his back to the other boy’s chest. Tom’s fingers never stop their gentle card through his hair.

“It’s ok,” Tom says again, avoiding the question, and that more than anything has Harry straining to remember.

The memories rush in like a thick slide of mud.

Tom caught in the blast, his stomach ripped open—drowning in the river—the trek through the desert—the altar, Harry’s fingers around the knife—blood, everywhere—

He turns. Or at least he tries to, but his limbs feel like they’re encased in iron, too heavy to move. The best he can do is weakly twist his neck to stare up at Tom.

His face is as familiar as ever, as familiar as the face in the mirror. But his eyes.

What has he done to his eyes? Gone is the fearful blue from before. These eyes are a deep wine red, warm and dark.

He watches them move, track over the expression of shock he's sure must be evident on his own face. He can't look away. They make his stomach warm, make him feel all loose and sleepy again.

"Darling," Tom says hungrily and blinks.

Harry's head clears a little. "Your stomach," he says, too exhausted to move, "are you ok?"

"You saved me," Tom whispers.

There's something a little off in the way he doesn't seem more concerned. But Harry doesn't really give a fuck. Tom was dying, he was ripped apart. And now he looks… well, not exactly healthy. But—alive. Powerful.

Harry, on the other hand, feels close to death. He drags his gaze around their surroundings. They're still in the ravine, rocky walls rising up all around them. The circle of sky at the top is now pitch black and it's deathly quiet.

Tom nuzzles the back of his neck, planting little cold kisses there that make him shiver.

Harry looks down and notices the blood. It's all over him, a crumbling red film that coats his naked torso and the ground underneath him. It's all over his hands, Tom's hands, a black pool creeping out like a infection from where they're sitting. His brow furrows. It's too much to be his alone, too much to even just be Tom's. He follows the sticky, winding trail with his eyes before freezing.

There is a headless torso on the floor, a few feet away. The spine glints white in the moonlight, a pale fist of bone protruding from the hips.

A few steps on from that, and there's a head. The silver-shot beard is familiar, as is the scar, but those black eyes now stare unseeing into a distance Harry can't reach.

Distantly, he realises he might be hyperventilating. It's not the violence—he's seen worse than this. It's the whole situation. There's something not right here, something that has coldness creeping over him. How are they both alive?

"What," he chokes, "what did you do, Tom?"

Tom hums and strokes his fingers down Harry's naked sides. "You were dying," he says. Harry knows him well enough to hear the rage in his voice, and feels a tiny frisson of fear. "I woke up, and you were bleeding on the ground next to me."

"I thought it would save you."

"It did," Tom says thinly. "But at the cost of your own life." His hands tighten until they hurt.

"So what did you do," Harry asks with a growing sense of foreboding, "how am I alive?"

Tom sighs. His breath smells oddly sweet and coppery. Harry wishes there was more light. The moon isn't enough, he wants to see his expression better.

“These people had access to something they shouldn’t have had,” Tom imparts eventually.

Harry swallows. The head on the floor still stares into the distance.

“What was it?”

Tom’s tongue licks a wet stripe up his neck. Harry shivers and then stills. “A terrible thing,” he whispers, “a creature of deals.”

Harry says nothing for a few seconds, processing. He starts to feel dizzy again and his neck aches. What does one say to that? He wants to laugh it off. He’s a pragmatist: he doesn’t believe in ghosts or angels or devils. But.

But that strange writing. And Tom’s red eyes.

“Oh god,” ends up slipping out, quietly, but the cavern is too silent to miss it.

Tom chuckles, his chest vibrating under Harry. “Not quite.”

Harry stares into nothingness and thinks about the blood.

“They used you to rip through to another place,” Tom murmurs. “And there, I could barter for my life.”

“Barter with what.” Harry’s mouth is dry.

“My soul,” Tom breathes. He licks up Harry’s neck again, and his tongue slips over a bright spot of pain, near his shoulder.

Harry flinches away but Tom doesn’t let him. With what seems like monumental effort, he reaches up, touches his fingertips to the spot.

There’s a wound there. He can feel his skin dipping in divots, and he traces the crescent, horror growing.

His hand falls down into his lap, and he stares down at it. At the wetness on his fingers.

“And theirs,” he adds. “To save your life it wanted more.”

Tom is drinking from me, Harry forces himself to think. Even the words sound stupid.

The world seems less and less real, and his eyes keep fluttering. Even breathing is becoming a monumental task, body heavy.

Tom shifts behind him. There’s a horrible wet ripping noise, but no pain.

“Here,” Tom croons into his ear.

Something presses against his mouth but he keeps his lips closed. He wants to sleep. He doesn’t want to have to be here, to confront this. He just needs a break, just a few minutes, and then he can get up and deal with whatever shit this is that they have stumbled into—

Tom's cold lips press against his, and all of a sudden his mouth is bursting with copper.

Half conscious, he kisses back and swallows.

*

When Harry comes to next, the first thing he realises is that he's in a bed. This in itself is enough to have him instantly cautious; the only beds in the war are the ones in the hospitals. Fear swims over him: what if he's lost his legs? Or his hands?

But no, he feels too well-rested for that. He's warm and clean and dozy. It can't be a hospital.

He forces his eyes open. To his relief, he seems to be there in entirety. His feet poke out from the edge of the white sheet, and his arms and hands are thankfully undamaged as he raises them in front of his face.

The next realisation quickly filters through: he's naked. This isn't particularly shocking (he is in the military) but it does raise some interesting questions.

Harry props himself up and peers around the room.

Soft morning light streams in from a window to pool on the bed, the floor, the wall. The window is open, the breeze ruffling through the white linen curtain and carrying with it the sound of an unfamiliar language, the beeps of cars and the brays of cattle. The room is pretty sparse, but obviously of a high quality: a bookshelf, spines faded, a huge china vase with a froth of some kind of green plant spilling out, a wardrobe, a little sofa done up in a strange geometric pattern. The bed itself is huge, four posters with a delicate swoop of white canopy hanging overhead.

Harry blinks. Where on earth is he?

The painting opposite the bed is of a beautiful naked lady with dark cat-like eyes, draped in extremely impractical red silk and fanning herself by what seems to be an oasis. The title of the picture is written in Arabic, engraved across the bottom of the huge gold frame.

So still in the desert.

For the second time, he remembers.

"Shit," is the first word to leave his mouth. He scrambles up into a more upright sitting position, and rubs his chest where his heart is suddenly galloping. His arm… he looks down and sees nothing more than a thin white scar. It looks years old, not days.

"Hello to you too," a voice says dryly from his left.

Harry's head whips to the side. In the shadowy corner of the room, to the side of the bed, is a large armchair. A familiar body stirs, leans forward in to the light.

Tom is dressed casually. He wears a white linen shirt with the sleeves rolled up, and formal brown trousers with his slender feet bare. His eyes are red.

Harry stares at him and tries to work out how he'd missed him during his scan of the room. It's the stillness, he realises as they regard each other. Tom is too still to be human—he doesn't even look like he's breathing.

"How did we get here?" Harry asks slowly. His heart is still working overtime.

A sharp slice of a smile. "I carried you through the sand," Tom tells him. "And then we took a taxi."

Through the sand, Harry thinks distantly. That can't be possible.

"And where are we?"

"Benghazi."

He blanches. It's days away from Mersa Brega. "Ok…"

Tom rises fluidly to a stand. It's like watching water flow—every movement is economical, perfect. "How do you feel?"

Harry swallows. "Good," he says truthfully, and then "confused. Worried about—about you, about whatever the fuck happened."

Tom nods as he sits on the end of the bed. His eyes catch on Harry's throat before they meet his gaze. "Do you remember it?"

"Yes," Harry says. His hands are trembling on his knees. "Could you… could you come here? Please?"

Tom's inhuman eyes somehow go soft. Sweeter. He leans forward.

Harry makes some awful, embarrassing noise as he wraps his arms around the coldness of the other boy and pulls him in. A little stuttering breath leaves Tom as he grips back just as tightly, holding Harry against his chest, breathing him in.

"I thought you were dead," Harry manages to get out. "You almost died, Tom, you bled so much—"

"I didn't though, you saved me."

"But," Harry lets out a wet laugh, "did I? I don't know what's happened to you, I—I don't know how to fix it."

"It's ok," Tom says. "You don't need to fix it."

He draws back, stares with wet, fixed eyes. Maybe Tom's right. Maybe whatever this is, it's fine. They have each other, after all. They survived that horrible fucking river. "So you're gonna stay now? With me?"

Tom cups his face like he's delicate, something to be treasured. There's a darkness to the way he speaks, too possessive. "I'll never leave you," he swears. "I swear it, Harry."

Harry nods and grips Tom's arms, holding on. He has so many questions, but the sheer relief running through him is enough to swallow them whole. Tom is with him—everything else can kindly go to hell for a little while.

"And the blood?" he asks after a few moments. "You drank it, didn't you?"

Tom doesn't really react, which means he's feeling something he doesn't want to. Harry thinks it might be guilt.

"Yes," he says calmly. "But you don't have to worry. I can control it now. I've had three days, after all."

Three days? He slept for *three days*?

"You were very weak, my love," Tom tells him gently at the look on his face.

The other boy is too close. He smells like himself, all cedar and cigarette smoke, and it reminds Harry of Wool's, of being children and then teenagers, giggling around the streets of London. He can't help it: he leans past the remaining centimetre between them and presses his lips into the plushness of Tom's.

Tom is cold and hard underneath him, but his body comes alive, his fingers gripping the back of Harry's hair, head nosing in closer, pressing them together.

Tom kisses him back just the way he knows Harry loves. Slots their mouths together and uses the distraction of his fingertips, stroking over his sides, to open him up and lick inside. Harry gasps as familiar heat floods his veins.

Tom is still crouched over him like some creature from under the bed, but it's not scary, if anything it just makes Harry burn hotter, grab his hips and pull.

Tom grunts and then he's aligning their hips, fingers pressing Harry's wrists into the pillow. The thin bones creak together hard enough to hurt, and his teeth catch on Tom's lip as he flinches.

Tom draws back. "I hurt you?" he asks, brows together. Instantly his hands let go and he stares the red marks on his skin, four neat finger stripes.

"You didn't," Harry insists, and then kicks the sheet fully off his naked body to distract.

Unsurprisingly, it very successful: Tom's eyes flick from his wrists, taking in the rest of him.

"Come on," Harry breathes, and grabs at Tom's stupid linen shirt, tugging it up.

Tom’s pupils swell and he licks his lips. He manoeuvres his shirt over his head, unbuttons his trousers with a single hand as he looms over Harry. It should scare him, having something which is no longer quite human looking at him like he wants to consume him, red eyes scorching with want. But it doesn't.

He just smiles, eyes catching on the blood welling up on Tom's lower lip from where he bit him earlier. Entranced, Harry reaches up and presses the pad of his thumb to the wound, stomach turning to liquid as Tom sucks it into his mouth and he feels the velvety scrape of tongue.

“Uh,” Harry says intelligently, beginning to feel light-headed with want.

Tom smirks and pins him again, mouth hot and insistent on Harry's, swallowing his moan. His hands skirt his body, fingers reaching all the sensitive spots, skimming his inner thighs with a touch so barely-there it has Harry bucking up into him, chasing the contact.

He nudges Harry's head to the side, pressing wet, searing kisses to the side of his neck that have him squirming, blinking at the curtains dancing in the breeze. He's dizzy with it, cheeks hot and eyes half-lidded, not even bothering to try to tamp down on the noises he's making, the little gasps that punch out of him as Tom slowly, so slowly, increases the pressure of his teeth until the skin breaks under him.

It’s dream-like. Surreal. *He’s drinking from me*, Harry thinks, on edge. *Why aren’t I scared—or disgusted?*

But there’s nothing but a simmering arousal as Tom swallows his blood and reaches for his cock. The little flame of pain on his throat is completely at odds to the feeling of a broad, callused palm wrapping around him, the pressure light enough that it makes him want to scream.

“Tom,” he gasps, hips bucking uselessly.

Tom draws back a little, eyes almost all black. He grins, teeth red. “Pretty,” he says watching Harry’s reaction as he increases the pressure. "And all for me."

Harry’s eyes squeeze shut and then open again as he tries to breathe. “You—” he manages, fingernails scraping in Tom’s trousers, “off.”

Tom raises an eyebrow in a way that’s almost humiliating, but Harry doesn’t care, not if it means he complies, lets go of Harry just long enough to strip off.

When he comes back it’s to press his hips down, align them until they’re rutting up against each other, slick and messy with precome. Tom spits in his hand, dirty enough that arousal punches through his stomach, and takes hold of them both. He can *feel* Tom, hard and wet next to him, and the friction’s so perfect that the sudden urge to come rises trembles up his thighs, fingers clenching as he tries to hold it off.

Blindly, he sucks Tom’s lip into his mouth again, licks into his mouth, unsure if he’s tasting Tom's blood or his own. Tom’s other hand pins his wrists, although he keeps stroking them

both, little low moans punching out of him as they both wind tighter and tighter.

Harry swallows and breathes, and then groans when he comes.

His whole body draws up, pulsing as he lets go, falling into the pleasure, and Tom draws back so he can watch.

It only takes a moment or two for the other boy to grunt, and Harry feels wetness on his stomach, chest heaving as he tries to breathe through the pleasure.

He collapses down into the pillow, Tom's weight pressing him to the bed as he goes lax.

Time slips as they lie there, getting their breath back.

"Oh my god," Harry says and then starts snickering, trying to muffle it in Tom's shoulder. The wet, sticky mess between them is cooling uncomfortably but Harry can't quite bring himself to push him off.

Tom snorts. "I should have made you beg," he muses, and then laughs when Harry shoves him.

Dutifully, he rolls to the side, keeping their legs tangled. They lie there together, listening as the sounds from outside return.

Harry's mind wanders.

The feeling of fingers leisurely stroking his throat, up and down in a hypnotic tease, starts to bring him back, and Tom's voice breaks through his light doze.

"When you kissed me," he murmurs, "was I bleeding?"

Harry thinks about that spot of red on his lower lip. "A bit," he mumbles back.

"Hmm," is all Tom replies.

Intrigued, Harry turns on his side and squints at him. "What?"

Tom watches him right back. "You shouldn't do that," he says. "My blood is," he shakes his head, looking for words. "Not normal anymore. It's dangerous for you."

Harry tries to recall how much he had. It would have been a drop or two, if any. And then he remembers before.

"Just before I passed out, in the desert. Didn't…"

Tom closes his wine-red eyes. Opens them again. "Yeah. I gave you some then. You needed it. I drank too much at the beginning," he admits quietly. "I couldn't hold it back, you were there and so lovely, and covered in blood, and I felt so empty that—"

Harry can't stop the intake of breath, remembering the strange dark regret in Tom's voice, the way it didn't sound quite human. Tom cuts off at it, looking pained.

“It’s ok,” Harry says.

Tom shakes his head. “I could have killed you.”

“But you didn’t.”

“But—”

“So your blood heals?” His fingers creep up to his neck, where again, there’s more of a days-old scar than a wound.

Tom nods. “It does, but there’s a cost. I don’t really know how I know it, but each time is a gamble. It can turn humans mad.”

Harry puts *that* disturbing thought to one side. “But just now, when you,” he mimes a bite, and Tom gives him an incredulous look. “You could stop yourself. Right?”

"I've had a few days to figure it out. My control is much better.”

Harry shifts, and then grimaces at the sickness on his stomach. Tom leans down to grab the sheet from where they’d kicked it to the floor, and swipes it over Harry’s stomach, and then his own.

“I feel gross,” Harry says, deciding to continue the conversation later. There are still a hell of a lot of unresolved questions, but he’s also famished: it’s been three days without food and Tom’s blood can apparently only solve some things. “Is there a bathroom, wherever this is?”

Tom sits up against the headboard. “We’re at the Rosen Blue hotel. And yeah, it’s through that door.”

Harry stares at the white door. “Wait,” he says, “do we have a shower?”

Tom looks like he wants to laugh. “Yes, Harry. There is a shower.”

Harry springs out of bed so fast he almost falls over with the sudden wave of dizziness.

Tom leans over to grab his arm, hold him steady. “Slowly,” he says, annoyed.

“Tom,” Harry shoots back, “I haven’t had a shower in five months.”

Tom lets go, raising his eyebrows. “By all means,” he says mockingly.

Harry’s too excited to even snark back.

Chapter End Notes

I'm back!!! took some time out to try (and fail) to write an original book.

guard down

The almond pastry flakes in his fingers and brown confetti drifts down onto the thin material of his shorts. Harry shoves the last bite in his mouth, not trying to stifle his noise of appreciation.

"So," he mumbles as he chews, "it's watching me right now?"

Tom eyes the way he's been scarfing down food with something resembling distaste, hidden under a brisk, polite smile.

“Yeah,” he says. “Watching, yes, but it can’t do anything.”

Harry know he looks a little unnerved, as Tom starts to smirk.

“So *Voldemort*,” Harry stresses the unfamiliar word, “just sits there, in your head?”

Tom nods. “And it talks. But it’s quiet and I just try not to listen.” His eyes go hazy and distant in a way that makes the pastry suddenly taste like ash in Harry's mouth. He puts the rest of it back down on the plate and swallows.

Tom’s eyes flick to him and he frowns. “Don’t look like that. It just talks about trying to help me.”

“Don’t listen to it,” Harry says strongly.

“I told you, I don’t.” Tom reaches out to swipe the corner of Harry's mouth with a thumb.

Harry watches the locals stare at them and fights back a glare. He knows what they think: that they’re soldiers, they’re lazy. Probably that they’re brothers, too, with how they’re always together.

He sighs. “There has to be a way to get rid of it.” Tom says nothing and Harry's frustration builds again. “Seriously?”

“I know it’s no angel, Harry. But it’s powerful. It can help us.”

Harry grabs hold of his knee under the table, hard. He shakes his head. “Yeah it’s ‘no angel’, it *eats souls*. You can’t keep that inside of yourself and expect there to be no consequence.”

Tom’s tilts his head and strange, red eyes appear above the tilt of his sunglasses. He's sitting on the rain-stained brown wicker like it's a throne, not a tattered chair outside the local cafe. In the shadow of the pergola, he's still glowing a pale white, no sweat dripping down his face like it is Harry's.

“Ok,” he says readily enough that Harry doesn’t believe him. “We try to find a cure.”

Harry gives him a long, searching look. “No more deals,” he says eventually. He can’t believe he’s having to say it out loud.

Tom nods.

Well. That deserves some positive reinforcement, doesn't it? Slowly, he tilts his head to the side, pretending to be looking to the left. It puts the line of his throat right on show.

Just as expected, the air around them seems to grow thicker and Tom goes still. “Harry." The word is a low and hungry.

“Hm?” he says turning back.

Tom’s hand shoots out with unnatural speed to wrap around his wrist. Harry barely has a chance to hiss in pain before Tom tosses a couple of coins on the table for their coffees and pulls him out of the shadow into the light of the street.

Harry tries not to look too pleased as he’s dragged back to their hotel.

It must look odd—they’re starting to attract attention from the few soldiers that pass through here. They can only give a false name and regiment so many times before they’re caught out.

"I hate this place," Tom mutters as he lets go of his hand.

Every time they go out he scowls at the scenery, the pretentious little cafes and the screeching automobiles that drive past every few minutes.

Harry follows him across the road, slipping back into the cool shade of the palms lining the street. “I know.”

He looks away as a group of soldiers round the corner. Head down, he tugs his hat further down his head, watching his feet cough up clouds of dirt from the road.

They reach their hotel and the boy at the door pushes it open to let them through. It's a nice hotel; Harry isn't sure how Tom managed it in his lonely race across the Libyan coast, dragging an unconscious teenager with him, but they have a briefcase full of dollars locked away in the safe in their room that's been there since he woke up.

He distantly wonders if Tom had killed someone for it.

Probably. Where else do you acquire a large amount of cash at such short notice?

Tom fixes his sunglasses and they cut across the marble lobby. A few of the men sitting in the wicker chairs, smoking, look up in interest and Harry cringes internally.

“One moment,” Tom says softly, leaving Harry near the elevator doors.

Harry presses the button and then watches curiously as Tom breaks off to head to the front desk.

The receptionist clearly fancies him. She's always staring at Tom, blinking away when he make eye contact. She's already flushing red; Harry wonders if she'll just break down when Tom actually talks to her.

And yes—why *is* he talking to her?

Harry leans back against the wall and enjoys the cool air from the fan as they exchange a few words. Soon enough the girl reaches under her desk and places a large brown envelope on the table.

Tom takes it under his arm and smiles at her.

Harry forces himself to look away, to expect the potted tree next to the lift. Stop being ridiculous, he tells himself at the familiar surge of jealously.

"That's a rather lovely expression," he hears in his ear as the lift doors creak open.

Tom grins down at him and Harry tries to look nonchalant. "What?"

The doors shut behind them and Tom has backed him up against the mirrored wall in a heartbeat, his lips pressing into Harry's.

It's hot and furious, and Harry is gasping as they reach their floor. Tom steps back and gives him a look that has his knees melting. He looks unbearably pleased as he holds out his arm, gesturing for Harry to go first.

He snorts. "Very chivalrous."

"Of course."

Back in their room, Harry sits on the bed and takes off his shoes before flopping back on the neatly tucked covers. He's hot and sticky, and his nose stings from the dry dust that settles over the city.

He closes his eyes and listens as Tom does the same. Then a patter of footsteps over the safe. A few clicks ring out, and then a small hiss as the door swings open.

"Are you going to tell me what that is?" Harry asks.

"It's a present," Tom says. He sounds cheerful.

"Oh?"

"For you."

Harry opens his eyes. Tom sits at the desk, counting their briefcase of money. On the side next to him, white paper spills out of the envelope.

"And what is this present?"

“It is,” Tom says distractedly as he bundles up a wad of notes, “official passage on one of the oil freights.”

Harry stops breathing. “To where?”

“Bournemouth.” Tom gives up how excited he is then, by turning to check Harry’s expression. He grins at whatever he finds.

Harry’s on his feet without even realising it, tiredness forgotten. “You’re joking? How on earth did you manage that?”

“Well love, we’ve recently become rather wealthy,” Tom says.

Harry wracks his mind trying to match up the hours Tom sometimes disappears for, to when he might have been able to both find a ship crew and bribe them well enough to accept two deserters.

“Oh shit,” he curses softly, amazed, “so we’re—we’re going back?”

“We can’t stay here much longer. They’re already noticing us.”

“But—Britain? I mean, the papers say it’s a wreck.”

“Everywhere’s a wreck,” Tom scoffs, “unless we manage to buy our way into Switzerland, but even we don’t have enough for that.”

Harry sits on the end of the bed and toys with the brocade pattern on the bedsheets. “So... back to London.”

Tom nods. “At first. We’ll need more money. I’m sure I can figure it out there, and then we go to the countryside. Cornwall, maybe. Or Wales.”

“I wonder what it’s like now,” Harry muses. “London, I mean. It’s been, what, a year? At least?”

“I don’t think it will be the London we remember.”

*

Tom is right. London is not the same.

It takes one, awful month by boat, skirting round the Cape of Good Hope, and finally reaching Bournemouth the morning of a cold, drizzling day in early October. After a night staying in one of the small, cramped rooms near the station, they catch the next train to London, going largely ignored by the few passengers who get on with them, reaching Waterloo station on the evening service.

Tom's face is stony as they pick their way past weeping couples, men lying listlessly in wheelchairs or hobbling by on crutches, tiny, solemn-faced children being led away by old grandparents. They have no luggage, no screaming relatives to greet them on the sooty platform. Just cold black rain, which tumbles down from a dark sky to turn the streets into stinking rivers of grit.

Outside the station, there are surprisingly few people. They both stare at the gutted buildings opposite, stained grey by fire and looted into a bare skeleton. It's hardened, this London. The war is not just arid deserts and machine guns, it's here too, in people's homes. But it's still home, in a way that nowhere else will ever be.

Harry bites back a shiver of guilt as he pickpockets a few of the gentlemen wandering around outside the station, waiting for their cars. Tom's money has almost run out; they had to pay another bribe halfway through their journey, when their vessel was stopped and searched. Now they're down to the last bundle of cash. But the plan was always to find more.

Harry hasn't asked yet how Tom plans to do it. Rob a bank maybe? They still don't know just how Tom's body has changed, but Harry would rather not test it with police guns.

They head down into old Southwark, braced against the wind chill. A storm is brewing up above, the clouds sunken and low with rain. There used to be a small hotel on the corner, but it's no longer there. The whole section of terraced housing has been somehow removed, and it sticks out like a missing tooth. Further down the road though, there's a new one, and they have one room left with a single bed.

The receptionist smirks as he leads the way down the uneven corridor. It makes Harry feel a bit amused actually: the old man probably thinks it's an awkward imposition. He might not look so pleased if he knew that they've been sleeping in the same bed for at least three months.

Their room is akin to the one they had on the ship: small, cramped, and mouldy. It's bitterly cold and there's no fire, just a tiny radiator under the window. Harry shivers and Tom eyes the blankets with concern. They won't do much good against Harry's lack of a proper coat and rain-damp clothing.

"God, it's like nothing's changed, has it?" Harry says into the sound of rain hitting their window.

"Honestly I think I'd prefer Wool's," Tom mutters as he takes off his coat and winces.

Harry stomach choses that moment to release a long, loud groan. He snorts. "Yeah at least Wool's had food." He hasn't eaten since the station in Bournemouth, caught up in the anxiety of being asked for his military papers, and now he's calmed down he's starving. "I'm going to ask downstairs if there's somewhere nearby."

Tom's eyes flit outside, at the weather, before back at Harry. He sighs. "Ok," he says, before staring back into the rain. He looks troubled, deep in thought, and Harry regards him worriedly for a moment before grabbing the key to their room off the side.

"I'll be back soon," he says quietly.

"Be careful," Tom calls out as Harry gently shuts the door behind him.

"I will," he replies under his breath as he makes his way down the corridor.

Downstairs he's informed by the still-smirking receptionist that they have nothing left of supper, which is usually served at seven o'clock sharp, but there are a few pubs nearby that might still be serving.

Harry grimaces up at the weather and ducks out into the rain.

He never thought he'd miss the desert.

On a whim, he heads back up towards Waterloo station, where he knows there'll still be people milling around. His breath escapes in short, frozen puffs as he hurries down the twists and turns of the backstreets of London, fingers already stinging from the cold. A little thrill creeps through him when he remembers how he used to find these alleyways scary, all the stories they used to tell about Jack the Ripper and his ghosts.

Harry chuckles as he walks. Now he's the twisted killer.

The next crash of thunder in the sky still makes him jump. He, like the other two people scurrying along the street, instantly look up.

It's not a plane—just thunder.

A few minutes later, the streets light up with a flash of bright white, and Harry starts to count. *One, two, three, four...* the boom follows after seven counts: a storm seven miles away. Strange that weather as bad as this would be something they all looked forward to. He'd trade a little rain for grounded German planes any day.

It's about ten minutes later that he realises he's being followed.

There are footsteps behind him, splashing through the gritty puddles. They remain, dogged, even when he loops back on himself, testing.

Hmm, he thinks. *Interesting*. Is he being targeted for a mugging? Or is it the police—do they somehow know they've escaped the military?

He should probably be afraid. But his ability to feel fear has been shot to shreds; now he just feels a wary kind of irritation. His shoulder feels bare without his rifle.

He stops up short around the next corner and glances behind him. A shadow stills in the corner, tall and thin.

Is he just being paranoid? Is this what they call PTSD?

Nah, Harry's not buying it.

He casts around, holding a hand over his eyes to stop the flow of water sluicing down his face. The shop fronts are all boarded up, but he can hear muted laughter, the fuzzy bass of a record being played and the clink of glasses. He's almost at a pub and he's starving. This overconfident street urchin can piss off.

Harry turns and walks quickly down the alley, up to the main street. The light grows, he smells smoke, something cooking. Thank god. The thought of the welcoming arms of a proper London pub almost makes him weep with longing.

But of course, his stalker has noticed that in anther few feet Harry will be safely ensconced in the street lights.

Something smacks into his back, hard. He goes stumbling, head ricocheting off the old brick wall as his shoulder his grabbed. Whoever it is slams him against the wall a second time, until Harry's head is full of stars.

Shit! he panics, trying to shove them off blindly.

But they're cold and immovable and he finds himself with his arm behind his back and his cheek shoved up against cold brick.

All of a sudden there's a strange, high-pitched giggle in his ear. He freezes.

"I like it when you struggle," the voice tells him.

That's no street urchin. It's no policeman either. This voice is posh, upper class. It doesn't make any sense.

"What—what do you want?" he chokes out.

The man chuckles softly. "I think that's my question, don't you?"

"What?"

"What are you doing here? Why have you come?"

Is this guy insane?

Harry struggles but he just pulls his arm up higher, until he's so afraid this lunatic is going to break his shoulder that he stops, panting. He's so dizzy he thinks he might throw up.

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"You and your companion. Did you think we wouldn't notice?"

"We came back from Libya," Harry spits. "We were fighting there, the North Africa front."

“So you’re *soldiers*.” The man sounds intrigued. “How did a common pair of ratings find a witch to make a deal with, hm?”

Harry’s blood goes cold. He shuts his eyes, forces himself to suck in a ragged breath.

“Witches?” he asks weakly, but the name fits. They’ve been calling Voldemort a demon all this time… but witch would do, wouldn’t it?

The pressure on his arm withdraws and Harry yanks it back, turning. He cradles his shoulder with his other hand and glares at the man before him.

Not a man. A teenager. Possibly younger than Harry. He’s tall, cloaked in a long, black overcoat. Water slicks his white hair to scalp, runs down his white face. Red eyes, Harry notices with a distant horror.

“You don’t know who I am, do you?” the boy sneers. He’s even got a fucking walking stick, for god’s sake.

Harry shakes his head and instantly regrets his vision flickers. “No idea mate.”

The boy’s eyes narrow. “Well I know who you are, Harry Potter. And I know Thomas Riddle, too.”

Clearly not that well considering Tom hates his full name with a passionate fury he usually reserves for toffs like this.

“What do you want with us?”

The boy laughs. It’s not a pleasant sound. “Him. We want him.”

Thunder cracks in the sky, a rumbling purr, and Harry moves. Threatening him is one thing but Tom? Harry has taken on far more than this to keep him safe.

He’s quick, efficient from years in the army. His hand has been wrapped around his pocket knife since the boy let him go, and he doesn’t hesitate when he lunges forward, sticks it in his stomach.

Harry has just enough time to see the boy’s face coil into a fury that is actually a little terrifying, before he sprints.

He’s so close to the main street, can hear the sound of conversation only a few feet away. His outstretched finger reach the puddle of light from the streetlight, and then—

Something curves around his stomach, a steel band, and he’s dragged back into the darkness.

For the third time, his head is smashed against the wall. And then again, and again, until Harry blacks out for a few seconds, until he tastes blood in his mouth and he can’t remember how to breathe.

“Draco,” a voice, much lower, whispers. “Is this the little bird you let fly away?”

A hand in his hair. Drags him up by the grip. His eyelashes flutter weakly but the boy's face swims into view, full of hatred.

"Yes father."

"F'ckoff," Harry slurs.

The boy scoffs and a sharp bite of pain makes itself known in his stomach. Harry's head lolls down. The tip of his own pocket knife is edging into his skin, Draco's hand is red and slippery around the short handle.

"How do you think this is going to feel when I twist it inside you?" Draco says calmly. "Do you think you'll cry?"

Harry wants to spit in his face, push him away, run, but he can't move. He thinks he might black out again as when he opens his eyes Draco is now standing further away.

"Come now, Draco," the older one chides. "We don't break toys that don't belong to us."

The older one is holding him up by his arm. He's toweringly tall, broad, looks to be in his early forties. He has the same pale hair and skin as the boy but there's something colder in the lines of his face, something less human.

Harry tries not to make a sound, even though with every exhale it feels like his shoulders are being crushed by the fingers wrapped around him.

Shit, Tom is going to be so angry with him. If he ever sees him again.

The man looks down at him again and smiles. "Let's get out of this awful weather, shall we?"

trapped

Time moves in confusing fragments. His mind skips across the bright surface of consciousness like a thin stone. Every time he wakes it is accompanied with a shock of nausea and pain that's so complete that each time he sinks gratefully back into the blood-warm water of dreams.

The timeline stretches out, nebulous.

He's being carried, over someone's shoulder.

Shiny black shoes, moving and moving until he grows too dizzy to watch.

The terrible sour smell of engine oil and new car.

A rattlesnake under his head, fangs in his stomach.

When he finally staggers back to himself, it's to a conversation happening right above his head. It's a new character: a gruff, cockney voice. It makes him more comfortable than the elongated, aristocratic vowels of 'Draco' and his father.

"Right then," the voice says. "At least he's not a heavy one."

"No," Draco's father says with the frostiest, most disdainful voice Harry has ever heard.

Harry makes some sort of mumbling groan when the hard surface beneath him bounces and suddenly there's an open sky above.

The bastards put him in a trunk.

"Come on then laddy," the gruff voice says and then heaves him up.

It's worse than the over-the-shoulder carry; it's a princess lift.

"Stop," Harry paws weakly at the man, who smells like manure and coal, but he just chuckles.

"If you act up now, I'll break your fingers," he says conversationally

Harry's hand falls back to his lap.

"Wher's'this?" Harry manages.

"Malfoy manor," the man says, and then Harry's gone again.

*

When he next wakes he's much sharper. He tests out his fingers and toes, flexing, until he determines he's also back in control of his body again.

There is a man outside his cell.

"Oh you're awake," he says, taking a drag of his cigarette.

It's the man who carried him here, going by the voice. He's a big bloke, old, too, with a salt and pepper beard and an unfortunately crooked nose.

Harry looks around carefully, remembering the promised threat of his fingers. The cell, for that is what it must be, is dark and narrow. The floor is slanted stone, the walls are slanted stone. He's been given a small cot, a bucket in the corner, and a few ration bars Harry actually recognises from the army are on the floor too along with a bottle of water.

He gets to his feet, supporting his weight with the wall. It hurts his head but he doesn't faint, so that's a positive.

"What's your name?" he asks, limping towards the bars. They're old but look distressingly sturdy.

The man eyes him like Harry's done something amusing. "Tim," he says.

"I'm Harry." He remembers this from their POW training: make yourself a person to them as quickly as possible.

"Alright Harry," Tim says, clearly holding back laughter.

Harry peers through into a wide, empty corridor. There's nobody else there, just Tim and his cigarette.

"Can I have a fag?" he asks.

Tim shrugs. "If it were up to me, but I've been told just to watch."

What the hell do they want with him?

"Who is Draco—and the dad?"

Tim blows out another round of smoke. "Wealthy, is who they are. Wealthy enough that they don't like questions."

Great, another dead end. This man's going to be completely unhelpful, isn't he?

Harry sighs. His knees feel wobbly so he goes over to the water and the ration bars and tries to ignore the memories that well up at the odd sugary taste.

Tom, who is not exactly all human, is definitely going to come for him. Harry's not an idiot: it's why they took him and why he'd down here. He's just a power play for them. A way to keep Tom on his toes.

God, it's grating though. Harry does not appreciate being overlooked as a threat. He pictures Draco's stupid pointed face and imagines how it might change in pain when Harry finally ends his horrible, posh existence.

"Well, I'll see you in the morning," Tim says cheerfully as he steps on his fag. He's made the whole cell stink of smoke and it's surprisingly unpleasant when you're not smoking yourself.

Harry doesn't reply. Just watches him go from the darkness and plots.

*

He only wakes up once in the night. The manor, and the cells, are cold and quiet. He shivers on the little bed, trying to convince himself it's just like the ones at basic training.

At first he doesn't really know why he's suddenly blinking. The cell is still cloaked in darkness, the corridor too. But there's a growing feeling of unease that Harry has learnt not to ignore.

He props himself up a little and squints through the black. Was it a rat? Would certainly add a little authenticity to the experience. He goes still and strains to hear it.

In the quiet, above the occasional creak of the castle, there is breathing.

It's quiet, steady. But it's there.

Harry's blood turns to ice. He's not imagining it. It's coming from the corner near the door, from the patch of shadow.

His tongue feels heavy with fear. "Draco?" he calls.

The darkness doesn't move. If only there was some kind of light down here, a candle, anything. A faint pain in his temples swims up as he gets unsteadily to his feet, using the wall to guide him.

He steps towards the shadow, fingers clenched into fists. If Draco is there, Harry is going to drag him to the ground.

Trembling, he reaches the corner. There's nothing there but chilled, empty space.

Harry lets his breath go in a half-gasp half-sigh and leans his shoulder against the wall. It's definitely bruised, but the pain is good for a while, cuts through the fog of fear and adrenaline. *God* he misses Tom. He's been spoiled: he's so used to falling asleep in the other

boy's arms. He's used to them figuring it out together, looking out for each other. Why did he agree to come back to Britain? Or London—they should have just gone straight to the country and avoided this whole mess.

It takes a good hour before Harry is able to drift back into an uncomfortable sleep. Even as his eyelids flutter and his mind goes dark, that shadow in the corner seems to stare.

Piss off, Harry tells it, and forces himself to sleep.

*

In the morning, a weak light crawls inside his cell and lies dying on the floor.

There's nothing in the corner. He can't help but feel a bit embarrassed at how easy it was for his mind to play tricks on him, although in his defence, Draco and his father are very, very creepy.

He feels tentatively better after sleeping, head not quite so woozy. Surprisingly enough, the fear has dissipated and now he's more just… incredibly *bored*. He waits, stuck pacing in the cell, for something to happen.

By his best estimate, an hour or so passes before he sees Tim again, who lopes out from the gloom of the corridor to hand him a ration bar and flask of water.

"Morning," the man rumbles.

"Good morning," Harry says brightly. "What's the plan for the day then?"

Tim gives him a look that Harry can't quite work out. It's either begrudging humour or 'I want to hurt you*',* one of the two.

He wolfs down the ration bar and then settles back to sit on his cot. Nothing to do but think… and so he thinks about the witches.

Draco must have one, he's got the red eyes. And Draco senior is too inhuman not to have one either. So there are multiple witches. And there are others who have made deals. *Is this actually a good thing?* Harry ponders. *Now we have a source of information*. They might know more about where the witches come from, what they want. Maybe how to get rid of them.

Well, it's a good thing if they don't get killed before finding any of that out.

The echo of footsteps breaks his concentration. It's so quiet down here that his hearing has become attuned to every little sound, and he impatiently bides his time until the door to the prison thuds open. A familiar flash of silver hair comes into view, bright in the shadows.

Draco eyes him with distaste as he comes to a stop outside the cell. Harry remembers his dream and tries not to shiver.

“Hello Harry.”

Harry gets to his feet warily. “What do you want?”

Draco smiles but it looks odd. “I suppose expecting some manners from you would be too much.”

“Not exactly well mannered to throw someone in a cell, is it?”

Red eyes flash at him, hungry. “Careful,” he murmurs as his long, spindly fingers wrap around the bars.

Creepy, Harry thinks with dismay. Guess he didn’t take too kindly to Harry stabbing him with a pocket knife.

“I just want to know why I’m here.”

“Don’t play dumb.”

Harry sighs and then thinks *fine then*. “What was your deal with your witch?”

Draco actually flinches then. “What?”

“I want to know what your deal was. What you gave for it.”

Draco’s mouth begins to stretch into a wide, toothy smile that does not meet his eyes. “I’m sure you do,” he says before the smile suddenly drops off his face. He blinks and goes still.

Harry watches. Is he about to die?

Draco zones back in. “Guess who’s arrived.”

Harry adds freakishly good hearing to his list of witch symptoms. “He’s here?”

There’s no point in playing, they both already know who they’re talking about.

Draco nods. “Now come along. We need to greet our guest.” He fiddles around with the lock until a definitive *thunk* rings out and the door creaks open.

Harry walks over, refusing to let the apprehension on his face. “Did you kidnap him off the street too?”

Draco raises an eyebrow. ”Of course not," he drawls, “we sent a car, obviously."

He’s too late to see the length of rope in Draco’s hand. Before he has time to do anything, Draco closes the gap between them in two short steps, yanking him over and grabbing his wrists. He moves quickly, looping the rope around Harry's hands and tightening it until it's a painful burn. His fingers start to throb almost immediately.

“Come on,” he says sweetly and jerks the rope.

Harry stumbles his way down the corridor, trying to find his balance with his hands tied in front of him. It’s a short corridor, he sees, with a heavy wooden door at the end. Draco pushes it open and brings them out into what looks like an alternate dimension.

“Where is this?” Harry breathes, looking at the paintings, the wallpaper, the plush carpet. With one step they’ve gone from medieval torture room to Georgian mansion.

“Malfoy Manor.”

“And where are we going now?”

“If you ask me another question I will muzzle you,” Draco tells him.

Harry closes his mouth. His fingers itch for his rifle as they make their way through a series of lavishly decorated rooms, all of them bigger than a whole floor at the orphanage. There are candelabras, wood-panelling, Persian rugs… Harry’s never seen anything like it.

Draco slows as they walk out into another hallway. He eyes the door ahead with a curious excitement, which in turn sparks Harry’s trepidation. Not that he has a choice—he’s led through, staggering at Draco’s heel.

This room is slightly smaller, a study, perhaps. The walls are deep red and covered with large oil paintings, housed in golden frames. A couple of arched windows stretch across one of the walls, showing a bright morning casting over an incredible garden. Shadows of the clouds drift dreamily over the floor. It's beautiful, like the rest has been, but also noticeably colder.

"Father," Draco says solemnly in greeting.

Harry stares at Draco senior, who stands with a spine so straight you could pick your teeth with it. He’s next to a large fireplace, almost as tall as he is. There's no fire in the grate, just the barely-there hint of old smoke in the air.

“Thank you, Draco,” his father says. “Take him over there.”

Harry is not even spared a cursory glance. Draco pulls him to stand in a seemingly random spot just to the left of the fireplace, furthest away from the windows. He’s shoved to his knees, and the way his hands are tied leaves him with no balance: he lands awkwardly on his elbows, nearly face-planting into the rug.

Draco sniggers and yanks him up to kneeling. "Are you going to keep still?" he croons, petting Harry’s hair.

Harry glares up at him and imagines ripping his eyes from his skull. Draco snorts.

For an anticlimactic minute or two, they all wait in silence. And then both Malfoys go still. In eerie synchronisation they turn towards the door, and Harry's heart thuds in his chest, hope and dread flooding through him in equal parts. He wants it to be Tom, wants to assure himself

the other is alright, but at the same time he's somewhat terrified at what his captors are going to do.

The door opens slowly, a breeze drafting through, cold on Harry's cheeks.

"Tom," he blurts out, ignoring how Draco grip on the rope binding his wrists tightens.

As soon as Tom steps inside, his eyes find Harry and he flinches at the violence in those deep, red eyes. Tom's gaze runs over him, freezing for a moment on the blood still matted in his hair, his bound hands, before a strange little half-smile wells up on his face.

"I am going to enjoy your deaths," he tells them and Harry shivers.

Malfoy's smile doesn't reach his eyes. "Please keep ahold of your temper, Mr. Riddle. Or may I call you Tom?"

Tom ignores him and takes a step towards Harry. "Are you ok?"

Harry nods. "Fine," and then thinks to add: "They have witches."

Tom's face darkens further. His gaze finally swoops to Draco and then to Malfoy. "Is that why you took him?"

Malfoy cocks his head and his long white hair ripples over his shoulders like water. "No. That is why we took *you.*"

Silence. And then: "Who exactly are you?"

Lucius' face is impassive, although Harry can see the barest hint of what might pass for irritation in the narrowing of his eyes. "My name is Lucius Malfoy."

"And what do you want, Lucius Malfoy?" His lips curl around the word, mocking.

Lucius takes it in his stride. "You have a witch," he says simply, assessing. Like he's a fool for even asking the question. "I wish to know how and why."

Tom tilts his head. "I hardly think threats are conducive to a constructive conversation."

When the hell did he learn to speak like this? Harry wonders. This is not Wool's orphanage Tom. It's not soldier Tom either.

"Perhaps," Lucius allows. And then gives Draco a look. "But just know, it will be exceedingly simple for me to slit his throat, no matter where he stands."

Draco pulls on the rope and Harry tries not to wince as he gets to his feet. Tom looks like he's about two seconds away from lunging.

"Here you are," Draco says sweetly, and pushes Harry towards Tom.

Thankfully he manages not to trip into the other boy, although Tom’s hands still come out to steady them.

"Are you alright?" Tom asks him quietly, taking a moment to scan his body, eyebrows furrowing as they reach his torso like he can smell the wound. His fingers clench hard around the robe-burnt red marks on Harry's wrist.

"Fine," he says quickly, unwilling to tear his eyes away from the two figures standing in front of them.

Tom skirts his fingers down Harry spine, subtly, as he continues to glare at Lucius

“How touching,” Lucius sneers. Harry almost rolls his eyes. "But I'm still waiting for your answers."

Draco speaks for the first time in Tom's presence. “And why are you here? Is it for us? Did you come to find us?"

Harry's fists clench. He's tired and grimy and fed up of being used as some kind of human sword of Damocles.

“It was an accident," he says tiredly. ”We were in Libya, somewhere in the desert, Tom was hurt, all but bled out. Some locals found us, nomads, and they took us through the sand to an altar.”

He watches the intrigue grow on Lucius’ face.

“They told me to slit my wrist over Tom’s body, that it would save him—”

“What, and you did?” Draco interrupts but snaps his mouth closed at a look from his father.

“So I did. And for a moment he had these strange markings on his face… the next thing I knew he was… Like this.”

Draco looks uneasy, keeps shifting where he stands.

"How wonderfully fascinating," Lucius murmurs in what Harry's supposes could pass for delight. “Where in Libya was this?

“Near Mersa Bréga,” Harry says stiffly, wondering if he’s giving away all his collateral.

“Could you find it on a map?"

He shrugs. "I could try." He's getting the feeling that he's just been raised from insect-level importance to whatever comes next. Favoured dog, perhaps.

“I hope it’s now clear,” Tom says coldly from beside him, “that we did not come to London to find you. We didn't even know of your existence. We came home, leaving a war which almost killed us."

Draco narrows his eyes at Tom's curt tone. "How do we know you're telling the truth—“ but Lucius waves a hand, cutting him off mid sentence.

"Draco," he says, a thin warning in the word. “Our guests must be tired. We shall show them to their rooms for now. To continue our conversation in more pleasant circumstances later.”

Translation: now that I want something from you, let's put all this kidnapping business behind us. He’s looking right at Harry’s blood stained face and Harry starts to feel angry again.

He doesn't trust them, not at all.

Especially not the way the disdain on Draco’s face has morphed into something that looks disturbingly like interest.

*

Their rooms are unsurprisingly lavish and over the top. In addition to a bedroom and a bathroom, they have two sitting rooms, one with a *grand piano*, and a reading room-slash-study that looks out over the gardens. He can't help but notice that even just the curtains in their bedroom are threaded with gold enough to feed the whole of Wool’s for at least five years. It's hard to take it all in; Harry has only ever seen this kind of wealth in picture books. He never realised people actually lived like this.

The servants are silent and clearly scared. Harry only has to ask for something—food, drink, directions—and they hurry to obey. It doesn't sit right with him. He feels like they're being fattened up before the slaughter, lulled into an overbearing hospitality to help them forget that they could be killed at any time.

Over four days, Malfoy interrogates them. He questions everything: from their experience of the war, their journey across north Africa, every tiny detail of their time spent in the altar.

In return, he feeds them little pieces of his own story.

The story of a young man—a lord’s son—with a growing interest in alchemy, who bought a book from a man in a marketplace in Ethiopia and thought nothing of it. Of the lonely nights, years later, spent in the library as his new wife grew sicker and sicker as the baby inside her grew. How desperate he became, desperate enough to follow a half-explained spell, to call up a demon to save her.

But the thing he called had a sense of humour. Entertained by his grief, it killed his wife, took her as a sacrifice to birth the dying child.

When Harry and Tom find their way back into their rooms, Tom is quiet with thought.

“I think Draco was supposed to be the sacrifice,” he says when they’re cold in bed and the candles go out.

“What?” Harry asks as he worms closer. Tom dutifully starts to card his fingers through Harry’s hair.

“I think Lucius tried to sacrifice Draco to his witch. But it took his wife instead.”

Harry feels a little sick as he thinks it through and realises he’s right. “Do you think he knows?”

“Draco?” Tom snorts. “He must have worked it out. Maybe that’s why he’s so… unhinged.”

“He’s one of you, though,” Harry points out. “So he must have made his own deal.”

“Probably for immortality. Like us.”

Harry sighs and looks into the darkness of their room. He can’t see much: they have the covers down on the four poster bed. Like a little cocoon where nobody can touch them.

*

After that he doesn't really see much of the Malfoys, although Tom often disappears during the day to discuss things with Lucius in his study. The few times Harry has felt confident enough to ‘walk past’ (read: eavesdrop), nothing they say makes sense. It’s all strange alphabets that he’s never heard of, unfamiliar places and unpronounceable names.

“What do you talk about with him?” Harry asks, when he finally catches him alone. “Did he say anything about reversing it?”

Tom smiles. “That’s what we’re tring to figure out.”

Harry’s surprised, despite himself. Lucius never gave any indication that he wanted to get rid of his witch… but of course he does. Who wants to be bonded to a creature that requires human sacrifice?

Tom goes on: “he thinks the altar might be the key, the one we used in Libya.”

“Wait, so he’s going over there?”

“Nah,” Tom dismisses, amused, “he’s too wealthy for that. He’s paying off a company to find it and ship it back.”

Harry tries hard not to feel the hope bubbling up in his chest. “So once you have the altar you think you can do it?”

“Maybe. There are still gaps to fill. A lot of it is in the language you saw on my body, when they called it up the first time. We only have a single book with it in, and it’s half burned away. Once we can put it back together… then maybe.”

Harry doesn't like the 'we' Tom seems to have slipped in to.

"Can I help?"

Tom's eyes flit to his, red and unreadable. "I don't think you would be able to read it. Not without a witch in your head."

Harry bites his lip, feeling useless. So what—he just lounges around this stupid mansion until Tom figures it out?

Fingers slip under his chin, tilt his face up until they're back to eye contact. "It's better like this," Tom says gently. "You've done enough for me. This is your chance to rest and get your strength back. Let me look after you for a change."

"You've been looking after me for a long time," Harry grumbles. He knows his ears are going red.

Tom smiles, pleased, and presses a kiss to his mouth. He's cold and smells like smoke. "And I'll look after you for a long time still."

slippery slopes

It’s late. So late that Harry is tucked in bed, asleep, and the only place Tom wants to be is curled into him, feeling himself blister.

He sighs and watches Lucius retake his seat.

They are in the gardens, far from the stone limbs of the house. On the small table between them are an array of candles, flickering in the night time breeze, and a decanter of something dark and shining. Tom can smell the dying leaves, the scent of crushed fennel and camomile nearby.

A clink chimes in the quiet, as Lucius fills his crystal tumbler. Tom is still waiting for him to speak, to explain why he asked to meet out here, at such an hour.

"Have you come across the term 'witchling'?" the silver man tests eventually, voice as soft as ever.

Tom regards him over whatever it is that Lucius has poured for him. It smells sweet, a little sharp, but Tom is not fool enough to sip. Not yet.

He gives a barely-there shake of his head, and Lucius hums in mock surprise.

"They really did tell you nothing," he says, almost to himself, and Tom bares down on the irritation, raising an eyebrow. Lucius enjoys the pantomime—he knows Tom's story, in as much detail as Tom is willing to share.

"They call us witchlings, here in Europe," he hands out finally, "those who still remember. The lusting fools who woke the witches.”

The way he says it makes it sound like the words belong to someone else.

Tom leans forward, eyes bright with candlelight and curiosity. “Witch seems a little… childish, don’t you think?” The term makes him think of the stories he read as a young boy, the old green women with pointy hats and broomsticks.

Lucius offers him a smirk. "Yes, quite a misnomer," he allows. "But all stories have their seeds sown somewhere in truth. I assure you these witches are notof the children's book variety." His smile stretches, pearly white teeth glinting. "These creatures are terrible, ancient things, claiming their delight in disease, pestilence, death."

Tom can see them, just for a moment: foul, grotesque things with pale, hairless limbs and strange, misshapen heads. They look up at him from the carcass of something only just dead, gaping black mouths stained with blood and gore. Inside his mind, they shriek, fleeing, and for a brief moment he catches something like a sneer that isn't his, before the images float away.

Lucius continues. “According to the story, it was a mercy of the Son of God himself to cast them away, back down into the deep, dark bed of hell where now they sleep, too powerful for the Devil himself to allow to wake. It's through their dreams now, that they find us when we call to them, and with with every piece of ourselves we give them, their slumber cracks, just a little."

Tom regards him carefully, feeling the thing that worms through his head prick up with interest, a little humour. “Can you give too much?”

He knows the answer.

The older man pierces him with a stony gaze, before he looks away, gaze drifting on the line of the perfectly trimmed hedges as he thinks of what to say next. “Of course,” he answers eventually, but the faraway look doesn't fade. Tom has the horrifying thought that he's listening to something, something Tom will never be able to hear but is all too familiar with. “Each time is a terrible, blind gamble.”

Lucius takes a measured sip from his glass, teeth stained red for a brief moment before he swallows, licking his lips.

“If every deal returns to them a thimbleful of power, every blood sacrifice adding just a touch more pressure to the lock… I dread to think what would happen if it breaks.”

Tom feels something like fear prick at his skin at the way Lucius' eyes pin him in place. It sounds absurd, so farfetched that a month ago he would be laughing, but now he feels nothing but dread.

"Indeed,” he murmurs instead.

Something hoots in the darkness and the moment seems to break.

Lucius smiles, suddenly as cold and polite as he usually is. "Alas, Tom, these are just stories," he says, but the way his eyes watch Tom's face would indicate otherwise. "I am certain we shall simply never know."

The two fall back into silence, Lucius staring at Tom, who in turn watches the candles burn as a sudden urge thrums through him, to go to back to their rooms, watch the rise and fall of Harry's chest, let that lull him into the closest thing he has to sleep now.

After a few minutes Lucius clears his throat.

"I wouldn't wish to keep you," he preempts silkily, and for once Tom doesn't sneer back, instead allows him a nod and rises fluidly, already stepping towards the castle.

"A word of advice however, if you'll permit me." Learning back into his chair, the silver-haired man looks suddenly regal in the flickering darkness as he calls out. Tom turns back expectantly. "I would be extremely wary in ceding any further of yourself. From what I can see you're wearing very thinly indeed. Most cannot even manage a second trade."

Tom doesn’t reply. He continues to walk, teeth itching. The bargains he's made so far are not nearly as much as he wants. He needs one more. Only one…

Voldemort strokes his mind, like a cat, and purrs. "You can take more than that, Tom," it croons, velvet voice curling around his tired brain. "I'll let you have more."

His fingers rub against his temple as he presses it out as best he can. He doesn't speak with it, not with words. He learnt last time that he can't trust himself. The best he can do is to ignore it, push it down, push it away. But it takes so much energy just to keep up the constant cognitive dissonance. So much energy—and he’s exhausted.

A laugh tinkles in his head, a burst of pleasure sparking in his bones at the sound. He swallows around his sudden sickness.

“One more," the witch tells him. “I know you want one more, come on, let me give it to you…”

An image of Harry flashes up and Tom resolutely forces his mind to go blank. He sinks back into the same inane counting game that he's been using for weeks.

"One, two, four, eight..." he mumbles aloud in the darkness of the castle. He times the addition with his footsteps as he climbs the east wing, until he reaches way up into the hundreds of thousands, and Voldemort has subsided. For now.

He slips into the room, shadows melding around him.

Harry's breathing is soft and measured from inside the cocoon of their bed. He's curled in the centre, so small, so painfully young. Tom's eyes can see the scars that litter him, even in this light. It irks him that some stand out more than his own: his initials, his bite marks, the paper thin crescents on his arms that saved Tom. He can read their history, carved into Harry's limbs.

Tom stares for a beat longer, feeling the familiar, awful possession rise up in him. He wants to mark him, tear into him, drink him up until Harry is safe inside Tom's ribs, where he can't leave, can't be hurt. His teeth itch again, and now his hands keep curling and uncurling.

"Tom?"

The murmur breaks him out of his stupor, and Tom realises he's been staring, standing over Harry for long enough that the other boy has woken.

Harry half-heartedly stretches out an arm. He doesn't sense anything wrong, and Tom breathes a private sigh of relief.

He’s quick to strip out of his clothes and join him under the sheets. He won't sleep, he never does. Not that Harry realises. This way Tom at leat gets to spend six or so hours enjoying the tide of his breathing, the softness to his face.

He feels tired all the time now, a low level buzz always present, grinding away at his temples and in the bruised crescents of his eyes.

"You're freezing," Harry mumbles, but nonetheless, his arms curve around Tom's chest, hugging him closer. His sighs with satisfaction as he nuzzles into Tom's neck.

Tom studies the curve of his nose, the spatter of freckles on his cheeks left over from Libya, the way his collarbones gently flush with sleep. That itching comes back. But now it’s worse, it’s spins out of control so rapidly that Tom is left reeling. He wants to bite, he wants to taste, he wants to *hurt*.

He has to he has to he has to—

His control slips.

His heartbeat remains steady as he shifts on to his knees, looms over Harry. The smile sticks on his face as he scoops up the sleeping boy and pulls him into his chest, settling them so his back is against the headboard and Harry’s back is pressed against his chest.

Harry, of course, begins to struggle. He’s tired though, limbs puppy-like and uncooperative. It just makes that thing in Tom's chest burn hotter.

“What are you doing,” he says annoyed, “you prat, let me sleep.”

Tom contents himself with stroking the soft skin of Harry’s stomach under his night shirt. Tries to swallow down the saliva in his mouth, the urge to rip.

Harry seems to notice something is wrong. He freezes. “Tom?”

"Shh," he tells Harry, hand stroking. He feels strange, fractured, like nothing's quite real. "Tell me who you belong to," he whispers lazily into Harry's neck, nosing along the skin. It smells like forests. Like life.

“What the fuck,” Harry says flatly. He’s gone stiff and angry but Tom doesn’t mind.

“See what we could have,” another voice echoes in his mind. “What I can give you?”

Tom laughs then, can't help, feels his grip tighten until Harry's ribs creak and he lets out a gasp of pain. He loves it, laps it up, finds his nails digging into Harry's skin. He wants to hear Harry hurt, hear him scream, until the only word he knows is Tom's name, until his eyes are hot with tears and only Tom can wipe them away, make it better.

The moment Tom's teeth pierce his neck, Harry starts really fighting in earnest. He bucks and thrashes, panting as he tries to escape the hold, the pain in his neck.

It's barely difficult to pin him down. And that *taste*—

"What are you doing," Harry yells, voice faltering as Tom gives an exceptionally hard pull, "*ah*—"

It’s fucked up, isn’t it? That he can make Harry like it, can force his body to react to something so evil, so sick. But he can’t stop. Won’t stop. Voldemort’s hand is out of the cage, waving through the bars.

"Tom," Harry groans. He's shaking, body flushed pink, little groans escaping his mouth. "Stop, you're going to kill me!"

Tom ignores the brief flash of pain as a bony elbow slams hard into his chest. The blood has stolen him. It's like liquid sunlight on his tongue, down his throat, and he's so cold and empty these days. It's like being a full person again, for those brief few seconds.

Harry's squirming starts to slow. He's gone all loose and floppy, but his body still twitches and shudders with every gulp.

Gradually, his limbs sink into the welcoming, poisonous cradle of Tom's body.

Stop, his own voice says. *You need to stop*.

I know that, Tom thinks, despondent, but I can't.

"Please," Harry mumbles.

He wrenches himself away, gasping. It's terrible. It's a terrible return to feeling half dead, and there's a part of him that wants to go back, wants to keep feeling that sunlight.

But Harry is ashen, and there are a score of gouges on Tom's arm that even now are pulling themselves back into smooth, unblemished skin.

The euphoria fades and Tom hates himself.

"Sorry," he says, panicking. "Sorry, darling, I'm so sorry—" but Harry has stopped replying.

Tom bites on his own wrist, where the second-hand blood bubbles up to the surface the easiest. It tastes disgusting like this, like he's already ruined it, but he's scared. He's panicking.

"Harry?" He prises his jaw open, as gently as he can, holds his wrist over until the blood splatters into Harry's blue lips. He massages his throat, helping him swallow.

The colour rushes back in to his cheeks. His breathing grows strong and deep, and Tom gently lays him down against the pillows.

He gets out of bed to stand in the corner, feeling too dirty to touch… and then has to go and sit back down on the bed, afraid Harry's breathing will slow again if he's not there to watch.

"You idiot," he tells himself. His voice trembles: how pathetic.

But what was that? It's the first time it's happened. Well. The second.

"I've been playing nicely," Voldemort whispers. "Give me one more and I'll keep it up."

Tom almost tears out his hair. Harry makes a little whimper and he freezes, stares down at him. His chin is covered in blood.

Tom leaps out of bed, goes to their bathroom and wets a towel. Gently, he wipes away the redness, somehow more relieved when Harry looks as he'd found him.

There's no way he won't remember this though. And what is Tom going to say? *Sorry, my witch fucked around with my brain?*

"I just opened the door," Voldemort laughs.

And if he keeps this up, if he keeps having to cancel out his mistakes with his sick blood, Harry is the one who will pay the price. He'll start to crave it like one of those wandering, frantic drug addicts that stutter down the streets of London to beg, their eyes wide and fever-bright with longing.

Tom takes a breath and switches it off. It's easy to do: perhaps the only good thing that has come with his witch. Emotions do not always have to be felt.

Now that he is back in calm, rational control, it's surprisingly easy to bat away the concern and the fear. He slipped up, yes, but it's only the first time since getting used to the change. This is not something to worry about: only a few more pieces left to slot into place and this will cease to be a problem.

Is it feasible to lock Harry away, just for the remaining couple of months?

Tom mulls it over. It's the best option. But… Harry is not exactly one for staying still. And besides, as long as he keeps the Malfoys in check, there is not much here to hurt him. Certainly not like the streets of war-torn London.

No, he decides, burying his face in Harry's shoulder. They will stick to the plan.

He wrinkles his nose, sniffs. Harry smells like sleep, and a little... *dusty*, he pinpoints with faint frustration. How many times has he warned Harry not to go exploring here?

"You never make it easy, do you?" he says.

Harry's eyes flutter and he turns on his side. Tom draws back, curious, and throws the towel on the floor, out of sight. Maybe there is a possibility he'll write it off as a nightmare?

Harry wakes up with a catch in his breath. His heart beat gallops, all of a sudden, Tom can hear it.

"Tom?" he says quietly after a few minutes.

"Mm?"

He's lying with his back to Tom, so he can't read his expression.

"Once I can forgive," Harry murmurs, "but you do this to me again and I promise you: I will find a way to tie you down, bind you here and make you watch as I fix you by myself."

The air around them feels thin and Tom feels a probably inappropriate rush of heat.

"Do you understand?"

He nods slowly, a small, sticky smile tilting the corners of his mouth as he angles his head in agreement. “Yes.”

We'll keep him safe, ours, he thinks viciously, and for a moment, he isn't sure who's voice it is.

*

The newspapers appear on the table in their sitting room every morning at eight o'clock.

Today, Harry assumes, is no different: he can see them, spread out in a pleasing fan on the polished wood as he slowly makes his way over, pausing to stretch.

He'd woken up surprisingly late in the day, at least after noon judging by the slant of bright light slipping in through the gaps in the heavy curtains. He feels jumpy and agitated, almost like he's almost too well-rested although he can't have had more than four or five hours of sleep.

He'd also woken up alone and *cold*. Despite the Manor's lavishness, the castle isn't built or decorated with comfort in mind, only aestheticism, and he even now he shivers as he takes a seat in one of the upholstered armchairs. Somehow, there's a small fire burning in the fireplace, already whistled down to a few spitting logs.

As he settles himself, there's a knock at the open door.

Harry gets out a mumbled greeting, and the neatly dressed servant who seems to have been assigned their rooms steps in to ask if he requires anything. He pushes down the faint, humiliating suspicion that all this time he's been standing outside, waiting for Harry to wake, and asks for tea.

The Daily Telegraph uncoils like two great paper wings and Harry begins his daily ritual.

He makes it through a few pages before his mind wanders. There’s a lot to think about, not least Tom’s strange rage the previous night. Harry might have woken up in full health, with no evidence of his throat being ripped into, but it still happened. Tom held him down and tore into him, gulped down his blood whilst Harry lay there feeble, weak.

It’s… incomprehensible.

They’ve been here for three weeks now. It’s long enough to see the change in Tom.

Although perhaps that's not entirely fair: in reality, they were apart for over a year, and even when they met again, they had a blissful what, two weeks, in a crowded, messy military base, before Tom made his deal.

But there are differences. Even with a timeline like that.

Tom hides it well, but not as well as he thinks he does. He's a little harder, more easily stoked to rage, jealousy, bitterness, than he was before. He can catch it in the way Tom's eyes track him a touch too intently, the way he insists on being present in every interaction Harry has with the Malfoys, how he sneers so utterly contemptuously whenever they discuss the war effort, or the way he's deliberately decided to be as vague as possible with regards to his great plan to rid himself of Voldemort. Harry doesn't want to push this, not when Tom's said before that the witch listens sometimes, but his frustration at being drip-fed little tidbits of knowledge is slowly becoming unbearable.

The main thing, he muses, is how much colder Tom has become. He can't stop the brief prickle of unease sometimes, when he feels Tom's long arms wrap around his chest, unyielding iron flesh, how when he smiles now it doesn't quite reach his eyes.

But—maybe this is the effect of the war, and not necessarily the witch.

Ah… but then last night. Last night he was—well, he was *scared*. Harry had opened his eyes and Tom has been sitting there, lounging on the bloodied sheets. He had looked unearthly, rendered in black and white by the light: black eyes, black lips, black blood and white teeth as he smiled. Watched the realisation of what he'd just done play across Harry's face, like a cat playing with a broken bird.

Harry's Tom would never have done a thing like that, not least because he'd have found it boring, how desperately unmatched they were with Harry still *asleep*.

And so Harry had used the only thing he could, trying to hide the tremor in his voice, even as he vowed inside his mind that he would find a gun, or a knife, keep it under his pillow. Tom didn't think he could die, but Harry could at least make him think twice about taking by force what Harry would have given freely.

His brooding is broken by the return of the man from before. Skilfully, he places the teapot, the tea cups, milk and sugar on the coffee table, making no noise. Steam curls comfortingly into the air, a thin twisting rope rising from the spout. He waits as the servant pours, watching the leaves as they catch in the net of the strainer, soft and wilted.

There's still an undeniable awkwardness about it, he decides, body stiff as mumbles his thanks and the man leaves with a slight bow. He feels weird about having someone treat him like a prince, when he's not—if anything he's a rung below these people, a common soldier for Christ's sake. And all the staff in the manor are old enough to be his parents.

Harry sips his tea and reads the paper, hungry for any knowledge of the world outside the mansion.

He's beginning to feel restless here; he's used to bustling cities, the warm press of bodies surrounding him, the quick-footed dance of living in a war zone. Now he spends his days skulking around the main libraries, torturing himself with reading anything that looks remotely relevant to Libya or witches. Lots of the books he picks are old, in languages Harry can't read, but he still scours the paragraphs for the familiar strange lettering. It's the only way

he can think of to help, to find more about the ritual, history, origins, anything at all to indicate what Tom might be planning, considering the bastard in question won't tell him.

It’s a sedentary, frustrating lifestyle, and it’s probably what explains the dreams.

Back in Africa, he was usually so exhausted from the constant vigilance that he'd fall asleep within minutes, a light, murky sleep where he'd wake every hour, quickly lulled back to unconsciousness by the familiar wash of sounds on the base. Now his sleep is too deep. It traps him, drowns him in dreams of bodies, of blood and gunfire, the whispers of Bisker and Thompson in the blackness. It is not unusual for him to shock awake with a yell, limbs trembling and muscles taught with adrenaline.

If Tom's there, it takes him a good few minutes to calm him down, softly repeating that *he's safe, they're in England, there are no soldiers, no ghosts here* (no, Harry thinks with grim amusement, here ghosts are the least of their problems). But half the time there's no Tom, just Harry and his racing, tripping heartbeat, cooling sweat clammy on his neck, the phantom ring of machine gun a constant noise in his ears.

He's almost done with his third paper by the time something catches his eye. It's a smaller article, in one of the less reputable papers, sandwiched between a ration-friendly recipe for beetroot cake and an advert calling for old cars parts.

FIFTH BOMBING TO HIT HANGLETON VILLAGE IN TWO WEEKS

Although the idea of a village on the outskirts of London being hit *five times* in an air raid is slightly incomprehensible in itself, that's not why he stops, mind stuttering to a halt. It's the picture, a crudely constructed diagram, the map of London reduced to the familiar squiggle of the Thames. Five stars that have been painstakingly drawn on in a strangely neat, unmistakable inverted T shape, to indicate the sites with significant recorded casualties. He could maybe understand a straight line if the bombs had been dropped all in one go, on one occasion. But this is apparently over a series of raids. How on earth would German planes even manage that?

He sits looking at it for a minute or two longer, quietly committing it's shape to memory, before he carefully tears out the page, folding it up and slipping it in the pocket of his trousers. He’ll ask Tom about it later.

He gets up to stretch his legs and makes his way to the window. The glass is cold, but displays a frosted wonderland of the Malfoy gardens, all pretty frozen soil and spindly hedges.

Harry frowns as he hears a buzzing, followed by a few taps. And then buzzing again. He stills trying to pinpoint it. On the left?

It's a fly. Just a stupid black fly, scouring the windowsill before bumping up against the glass as it tries to get outside. He watches it repeat its panicked, futile loop, and suddenly begins to feel sick.

A memory flashes up: flies on the sand, next to a familiar face. A dead tongue, slippery in his palm—

Harry blinks away. He walks to the left window and grips the latch. Muscles straining, he tries to pull it up, but despite his best efforts it resolutely does not budge.

He tries for a few more seconds, before realising suddenly that the noise has disappeared. Casting around, he looks for the fly, but it's gone.

fear

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The realisation that they've been at Malfoy Manor for two months hits him out of the blue on a Tuesday afternoon.

It's actually overhearing one of the maids that does it. Harry has taken to skulking around the manor and methodically going through each room in the west wing, which he has been expressly forbidden from entering. It's the wing of the house that Draco and Lucius occupy, and he knows they are most likely already aware that he's been tiptoeing around, poking his head into rooms… but hey. At least some sort of confrontation would be better than this purgatorial boredom he's drowning in. There are only so many hours he can spend in the library, only so much time he can spend waiting around for Tom to drag himself away from his secret talks with Lucius to grace Harry with his presence.

So yes, he's in the west wing, hiding around the corner when two maids walk by, laden with bed linen.

It takes him a moment to pin down that they're talking about their plans for Christmas. Christmas *next week*.

Still in conversation, they pass by without seeing him—he can thank Wool's for that particular skill—as he chews his lip and wonders how he missed it considering he reads the newspaper every day.

Christmas. It was October when they got off that damn ship. Two months of Voldemort in Tom's head, of listening to him mumble numbers under his breath, of putting up with Draco's eerily intense stares. Two months of Tom slowly slipping into someone that Harry only half knows.

He steps out and begins to drift morosely down the corridor.

How long is this supposed to take? Harry had assumed months, but could it be years? He can't do this for years. This—this isn't living. It's… it's a jail. A lovely, well-furnished jail, where he's fed and warm and kept cosseted. But a jail nonetheless.

At least in Libya he was useful.

The next room he decides to enter is not empty.

Harry stands in the doorway and peers through the cracked door at a familiar head of dark curls.

What is Tom doing here?

It’s a large, disused room. The floor is a simple stone, and the walls are white. Sheet-covered furniture looms across the floor in odd, bulky icebergs. For some reason, Tom has thrown the sheet from a desk and chair, near the window, and is bent over something, writing.

Harry mentally debates it. Is Tom going to find his presence where he knows he’s not supposed to be amusing or anger-inducing? These days he’s hard to predict. And then he feels annoyed at himself. He shouldn’t have to hide from Tom, he shouldn’t have to run away.

He slips inside and closes the door.

Tom sighs but doesn’t look up.

“What are you doing?” he asks as he walks over. His footsteps echo in the empty room.

“Writing,” Tom says distantly.

Harry’s close enough to see: a black notebook, scribbled in another language.

“When did you learn French?”

Tom shrugs. “I don’t know.”

Harry swallows. Another witch thing, then. “Well I guess it makes up for the teaching at Wool’s.”

It’s not even enough to make him crack a smile, and Harry’s own fades. He begins to feel adrenaline seep into his bloodstream, and it takes him a moment to realise he’s angry. He’s angry that Tom is keeping secrets, not telling him things, and meanwhile he’s just sitting around wasting his time.

“Tom,” he says, his voice too honest. "What are you doing?

Tom looks up at that, scans his face. He reaches out, takes Harry’s hand with his own cold one. “You know what I’m doing. I’m trying to fix this.”

Harry shakes his head. “You’re cutting me out.” He almost wishes he could take the words back, he sounds like some kind of petulant child.

Tom tugs him closer, until Harry stands in between his legs. Even though Harry is the one looking down, the one in the position of power, he’s the only one who’s neck is prickling.

“I’m trying to protect you,” Tom says. “This isn’t something you can do, Harry. It’s on me this time. I just need you to be a little more patient.”

“But what’s left to do?” he asks, desperate. “Even if I can’t help you, I just want to know.”

Tom’s red eyes look unfathomably dark. Steady. “There is a piece missing,” he says after a few seconds have gone by. “What we need... it requires a ritual. like the one you did for me. That writing was the key.”

“Ok…” This is good, this is a start.

“But despite what Lucius knows, all the knowledge he’s collected on this, we’re missing a few of the runes. It means we can’t complete it even though we’ve already worked out the rest.”

“Surely there’s got to be more people like the nomads out there, who might know more?”

“There aren’t. But even if there are it could take years, *decades* to find them, and I don’t want to wait that long. I can’t.”

So what do we do, Harry almost asks, before something has him pausing. It’s not despondency on Tom’s face. It’s… trepidation. Anxiety, almost.

Harry thinks.

And then takes his hand out of Tom’s. He’s shaking his head before he can stop himself. “Please tell me you’re not planning something stupid.”

Tom says nothing, gives nothing away.

“Tom.”

“What do you want to me say, Harry?”

The anger rises up again and he swallows, tries to bat it down. “That... you’re not planning to cut another deal, that there’s no way you could be that—that selfish.”

Tom is somehow on his feet between blinks. His fingers wrap around Harry’s shoulders as he looms, shadow-like. “You don’t trust me?”

Harry almost laughs. “I trust you. I don’t trust whatever it is that’s in your head telling you that this a good idea!”

The room feels cold. White and empty and silent. Harry hates that he feels afraid.

“What Voldemort says doesn’t matter.”

“You’re strong, Tom, but this isn’t something you can win against. It’s not normal, it’s not *human*. Why do you think it would give you a way to get rid of it? It doesn’t make any sense.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Harry recoils. “Because you won’t tell me!”

He wrenches himself out of Tom’s grip, and for a moment he thinks Tom is going to lunge at him.

But he doesn't. His hands curl into fists by his sides as he tracks the movement of Harry stepping back.

"I don't want you involved in this," he growls, finally showing his frustration. "I don't want it anywhere near you."

Harry's too far gone to care. "I think I'm already involved," he snaps, thinking of the scar on his forearm, all the invisible ones on his neck. "But if you do this, make another deal with it, then…"

Then I'm done? Then I'll leave? It's almost laughable, how untrue it would be. Harry will never leave him. But he knows that's quite possibly the only thing, the only leverage he has over the other. Himself.

"Don't, Harry," Tom says softly. But his face is not soft; it's hard, possessive. "Don't force my hand."

Harry stares at him a moment longer. And then walks away.

*

Avoiding Tom is hardly difficult. They barely saw each other in the first instance. Now Harry just makes sure to spend as little time as possible in their rooms. At night, he curls up in a cold, miserable ball on one side of their huge bed, doesn't turn around when he feels Tom slip in next to him, even when he feels the heavy gaze on his back.

It's ridiculous, he thinks, that Tom would rather work on his own. Surely two people are better than one—surely Harry could help, even just as a sounding board. Why cut him out like this? Why chose a witch over the person that cares about him the most? Is this another side effect from the two deals already done, that he becomes so closed minded?

The anger helps to steel his resolve.

Two days after their argument, he wakes up again to an empty bed. It's a little relieving, honestly. Every time he sees Tom he feels pissed off all over again. He can't even get the space he wants; his anxiety forces him to check Tom every day, see if anything's changed, if he made the deal like he threatened he would.

He gets out of bed, dresses in the cold and then makes his way back to the west wing. He hasn't seen either Malfoy for at least three or four days. They often leave the manor to go to London, Tom had told him, maybe to get blood, Harry's never quite been brave enough to ask.

Maybe there's a small part of him that wants Tom to catch him. To tell him he's putting himself in danger, that he's being reckless.

But he tell himself he’s there to find Lucius’ study.

He knows which door it is. He found it a few days ago, right before he’d stumbled across Tom, but the door had been locked.

This time, Harry comes prepared with a small pick he'd fashioned from a loose nail, and a few preciously stored paperclips to assist.

It takes him a few tries, but the lock is old and slips eventually. The door begrudgingly clicks open and Harry slips inside.

It smells weirdly familiar, like cigar-smoke and damp. Faded tapestries shroud the walls, dust motes are suspended in the air from the light coming in from the stained glass windows. There is a large desk, armchairs, a coffee table, and a wall taken up by bookshelves, the letters on the spines gold but illegible.

It’s… *creepy*, is what it is. Or maybe that’s just the lack of light.

He immediately dismisses anything but the desk. Carefully, he sifts through the objects arranged on the surface: stacked sheets of paper, a small silver key, a few newspapers, a weird decanter of something black that Harry resolutely does not think about.

He wipes his sweaty palms no his trousers and thumbs through the paper.

French, of course.

Next he tries the drawers.

One of them still has the key in the lock, and inside there’s more paper, this time in English. He holds a few sheets up to the light and squints. It looks like some kind of shipping timetable, a few dates scattered with the names of ports.

He puts them down and leans in to take out the rest, when something dark at the bottom of the drawer catches his eye. He digs around, fingers catching on something smooth, and carefully tugs it out.

At first he thinks it's Tom's notebook from before, but quickly realises it's much too old. The cover is papery thin and brittle, and half the book has obviously been torn out, leaving little fraying stubs. There's something about the yellowed pages that creeps him out, the distinct brown colour of the writing.

He flips through, pausing as some other small piece of paper falls out, fluttering to the ground. It's a surprisingly recent annotation, bright white with a peculiar symbol drawn in what is obviously modern ink. Again, there's more writing (and again, in french), but Harry can't stop staring down at it, memorising the weirdly angular lines.

The chime of a grandfather clock sounds from the corner of the room next to the bookcase. He jumps before grabbing a one of the blank sheets off the top of the desk and copying down the symbol. He’s feeling more and more uneasy. Something’s telling him to leave, and if there’s one thing Harry has learnt as a soldier it’s to pay attention to his gut.

He stuffs the paper in his pocket and clears up the desk, pushing the drawers closed. Next is the bookcase.

He's just put his fingers on the edge of one of the books when there's a thump from outside the door. He freezes at the unmistakable clink of keys.

Hide. He needs to hide. Getting caught in the west wing is one thing, getting caught going through Lucius' study is another.

He whips around. Under the desk? No. Behind the curtain? No, it's too thin. Lucius might be right behind the butler, he would catch him immediately.

He's running out of time, standing there in frozen indecision, when his eyes catch on a strange crack along the wall. He follows it with his fingers and then sees what looks like an odd metal bookend.

He grabs it, and the bookcase swings open.

He listens to the voice in the room and tries not to breathe too heavily. The butler is muttering to himself, complaining about the dust, and the floor creaks as he paces around the study.

It's ridiculous, Harry thinks to himself, that Lucius has a hidden room behind a bookcase. Especially one so obvious! But then again, he probably doesn't have to worry about people breaking in. Not with a witch on his side.

Whatever this space is, it's pitch black and freezing cold. The ghostly breath of cobwebs cling to his face and he fights the urge to sneeze.

Slowly, the minutes pass and his eyes adjust.

Harry's fear bleeds into curiosity. It's not a room, he realises, it's a corridor. He feels a bit of a fool when he spies the light switch next to the door, but it's not like he can turn it on. He hasn't heard the door close yet, which means the butler could still be there.

Slowly, he feels his way out into the shadows. The floor slopes slightly as he walks, and he hears scuttling in the darkness. He shivers. He's fine with mice—as long as it's not a rat.

Soon enough, a door emerges out of the gloom. There are bars on the window, and it reminds him suddenly of that weird cell he'd been in for the first couple of days in the manor.

God, he really shouldn't be here. If he's caught, he's dead. But what is Lucius hiding here? He has to know.

His feet take him to the door, heart thumping loudly as he peers through the slatted view.

To his surprise, the room is empty.

He'd been half expecting to see some poor sod shackled up in there, covered in bite marks and maybe missing a few limbs. But instead it seems to be nothing more than a glorified store cupboard. He makes out the murky shape of boxes huddled in one corner, glass bottles stacked on shelf upon shelf, covering the walls. There's something else in there too, a spot of darkness in the corner that might be furniture of some sort.

The other thing is the smell. There must be something rotting in there, as it smells like soil and red wine, only a hundred times stronger.

Oh god, maybe it is a victim. Or it's where they keep their blood when they're in the manor.

He holds his breath as he scans the darkness but then has to step back, sucking in the dusty air. He can still smell it though, like it's stuck in his nose.

He fumbles back to the bookcase door and strains his ears. It's silent.

Now or never, he thinks grimly, and pushes on the door. It swings open quietly and he peeks his head around.

Empty.

He hops out, closing it behind him and rubbing his nose. The study seems even more disturbing now that he knows it has some secret, terrible storeroom behind it, although it's helped somewhat by the vacuum cleaner that the butler has left behind. It feels very out of place… but as old and creaking as the manor is, it is still the twentieth century—they have lights and central heating.

It also, however, implies that he is coming back.

With a quick scan to make sure nothing else is out of place, Harry slips out of the room and scurries down the corridor.

He almost makes it.

He's almost at the main atrium that leads from the west wing to the east wing, before he turns the corner and comes face to face with the second worst possible person he could see.

At least, he tells himself as he freezes, it's not Lucius.

"Oh?" There's a horrible look of satisfaction on Draco's aristocratic face. Like he's been waiting for an excuse, all this time, and now Harry has give him one. "What are you doing here, Potter?"

He prowls forward, cocking his head. Harry takes a step backwards and then another, until his back bumps against the wall and he has nowhere to go. Draco towers over him, all thin and spindly and pale. His palm snakes next to Harry's face as he cages him in.

"Hm?" he breathes. "Sneaking around where you're not supposed to be. Go on, tell me."

Harry glares at him. Draco wasn't brought up in an orphanage, he's never been to war. He's just a spoiled, pitiful creature that doesn't quite understand what it means to be a human.

"It's none of your business," he says, but Draco's hand darts out and wraps itself around Harry's neck.

He doesn't squeeze. Not yet.

"Get off me," Harry tells him thinly.

Draco leans closers, runs his pointy, cold nose over the thin skin of Harry's throat and breathes. "I don't think I will."

Harry tries to knee him in the balls.

The next thing he knows he's slammed back against the wall so hard the breath is driven from his lungs, and that hand on his neck starts to squeeze. A portrait down the hall falls from his hang with a slam of noise.

Harry's feet are no longer touching the floor.

He claws at Draco's hold. "Stop," he chokes.

"Trespassers get punished," Draco says sweetly. He's grinning now, showing his white, sharp teeth.

"You're—insane," Harry manages, and then the hand on his neck is ripped away.

His legs almost buckle as he drops, managing to keep himself up with the wall.

Tom has Draco by his long blonde hair.

"Riddle!" Draco spits, hands coming up to push him away.

Tom hits him across the face, so hard that he crashes across the floor. His red eyes are cold, face white and stern.

It's humiliating, and Draco knows it. His face contorts, pink, and he whips up into a crouch on his feet in an instant. But even Draco seems to have survival instincts. He just stares up, unnaturally still, seething.

"Don't touch him." Tom says simply. Softly. "Or I will break every part of you that does."

It's terrifying. Harry forgets to breathe.

Tom takes hold of his wrist, silent. Walks them back down the corridor, back through the twist of corridors until their own rooms.

Harry feels that horrible red gaze on his back the whole time.

When they reach their room, Tom finally lets go of him. He looks furious.

“What were you doing there?” is the first thing he says when he drags his eyes away from Harry’s neck.

Harry has not forgotten his own anger. “Looking for information.”

Tom stares at him, incredulous. “Did you listen to a word I said?”

“Which part? The one where you told me you were going to give up another chunk of your soul?”

“I asked you to be patient!”

Tom doesn’t usually raise his voice. But Harry's still shaking and his neck hurts and he—he doesn't care.

“I can’t be patient," he snaps, "not when it comes to you.”

Tom turns away and fists his hair. “You’re proving my point. You are unsafe and you cannot protect yourself. Why aren't you seeing this?”

Harry stiffens. “Fuck you.”

The world shifts and he is suddenly flat down on his back on the bed. Tom is on his hands and knees over him, eyes wild. There's a terrible parallel with a night not that long ago, where Harry woke up dizzy and saw blood on Tom's mouth.

“Don’t,” Tom whispers, and it’s somehow worse than his shout. “Don’t push me, I’ve very fucking close to breaking point with you.”

“What does that mean?”

“I don’t want you to leave these rooms.”

Harry almost laughs. “You want me to stay here? For how long?”

“A week.”

Harry’s blood runs cold. The sarcastic smile falls from his face as he stares into Tom’s. Looks at the shrapnel scar, the pointed chin, all the things that he’s become so familiar with.

“So you’re going to do it?”

Tom says nothing, like he can’t bring himself to.

Harry’s eyes feel suddenly hot. His throat is dry, achey, but he forces his expression to even out. His hands tremble when they cup Tom’s face—this is the last thing he has.

“Please,” he says. “Please don’t.”

Tom’s eyes close. “Do you think I like this?” he says. “Do you think I like peeling bits of myself away and feeding it to that thing? I hate it. I hate it but I have to do it one last time, do you get that? Because if I don’t then I can’t have you.”

Harry’s hand drops. “What?”

Tom’s eyes creak open. The pupil is a black hole with no light. “I can’t be with you like this. Not when I could kill you so—so *easily*.” Tom’s cold hand comes around his neck. It’s feather-light. Harry stops breathing. “I don’t think you understand,” he breathes, “how fragile you have become.”

For once in his life, Harry doesn’t know what to say. He has no comeback to this. His anger has left him, scraped him dry and now he just feels… sad. Empty. Afraid.

He makes no move to free himself.

Tom sighs, and for a moment he looks just like the Tom Harry loves. And then his expression bundles itself up and goes cold. He withdraws his hand, leans back, out of Harry’s space.

“Don't let me drink from you,” he says into the quiet. “Whatever happens, you need to stay away.”

Tom leaves, and Harry stays staring at the ceiling. His head is too full. He’s exhausted. He doesn’t know what to do, how to stop Tom from making a mistake like this. He might not even survive it, has he thought about that?

And the sacrifice... first it was one person, then eight. What the hell is Voldemort going to require this time? And that's just to pique his interest, it doesn't count the *soul* Tom will have to give it.

Harry can't even bring himself to blink, even though his eyes grow dry and his throat hurts.

He never even told Tom about the bookcase.

Chapter End Notes

things literally spiral out of control *so hard* from here on out :D

trespasser

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The muffled voices on the other side of the wall have his heart slamming against his ribs, body stiffening in terror. It's freezing cold in the cramped little corridor, but once again he's too afraid to turn on the light.

Is it Lucius? Does he know Harry is in his study?

He inches backwards and flinches when screams begin to ring out. Lucius sounds like he's torturing someone. And whoever they are, they're coming closer to the bookshelf.

Don't get caught. Whatever you do, don't let him know you're here. The words echo through his head, low and insistent.

The shrieks intensify, warped and inhuman, and Harry feels his eyes start to well up with horrified tears, every tentative step he takes a risk, every short pant of his breath a beacon. The bookcase door begins to rattle, a thin strip of light piercing the shadows as the door is tugged open.

The fear crescendos. He stumbles back and sprints towards that odd door with the barred window, pushing open the door.

He closes it as quickly as he can and hunkers down with his back to the wood.

He's breathing too quickly, too loudly, but he can't stop himself. All he knows is the sheer terror of discovery.

The screams in the study cut off.

He holds his breath, ears straining as he looks around. Although the whole room is a murky black, he can just about see the glints of the bottles on the wall, the boxes. It's cold too, colder than in the corridor by a good few degrees. He hunches down into himself, locking his jaw as his teeth start to chatter.

A whispered groan rings out, soft in the darkness.

Harry's head whips up. It's that shadow, the one he thought was furniture. It's—

It's *moving*.

"Who are you?" He gets out. He sounds like a child, all high-pitched and fearful.

The groan starts up again, raspy, exhausted. The darkness moves like a great arachnid, slinking along the wall towards him.

He pushes his back further into the door, eyes wide with horror.

“Stay back!”

The thing hisses and Harry is on his feet before he can think twice. He yanks at the door so hard his shoulders it feels like his shoulders might release from their sockets. Why the hell isn’t it opening? It was fine just a second ago!

He looks down in dismay and then stops. His grip on the handle weakness as he stares, uncomprehending.

The door isn't real. It's just paint. A rectangular black shadow on the wall.

Something moves behind him, just a hairs breadth away from his skin. He chokes on a sob, desperately wanting to do anything but turn around and face it.

But he won’t die scared.

He inches around, stomach cold and tight.

It's there, right in front of him, barely visible in the dark. The pale head is much too large for the body, slumped on thin shoulders, neck unable to support the weight. Whatever it is has no nose, and tiny red eyes peer up at him, stretched so wide he can see the whites around the edges.

"I've been waiting," it whispers, mouth split into a macabre, too-stretched grin and Harry opens his mouth to scream—

*

He nearly throws up when he wakes.

He sits, hunched over in bed and breathes through the nausea. He’s wet with sweat, panting.

What the hell was he dreaming about? Red eyes?

But it’s gone, whatever it was.

When he’s calmed down he notices the smell. There's only a faint trace of it in the air, rotting flowers mingled with something heavy and meaty, something that feels vaguely familiar but he doesn't know why. He straightens up and opens his eyes.

He almost lets out a yelp.

Tom is perched on the other side of the bed.

Harry stares at him for a few moments. His face is very white and very blank. Something is off, Harry can't help but think. His features… they're all a little wrong. He's always been attractive, always been beautiful, but now he's almost inhumanly so. His face is perfectly symmetrical—an undeniable work of art, but there's hardly anything recognisably Tom in the way he smiles, the inhuman tilt to his head as he studies Harry studying him.

Harry's face, fingertips, stomach, they all go cold in a sickening wave as he realises what he's looking at.

He's done it, hasn't he?

"Breathe Harry," Tom says softly.

He realises his chest is burning, head light, and manages a shaky inhale, unable to look away from that piercing eye contact, the way it splinters curiously inside his skull to see what's there. Now that it's actually happened, he doesn't quite know what to do. He sits, frozen, with the sheets spilling around him as Tom slips closer, a cruel tug to his mouth. Familiar fingers trace the side of his face, the same floppy dark hair curling over his ears.

Harry's thoughts immediately go to the weapons stashed around the room.

"No need to look so wary," Tom chuckles, smoothing Harry's nest of sleep-hair out of his face with a cold hand.

Harry has to hold back a shiver at the familiarity, can't quite stop himself from reflexively closing his eyes. "Wouldn't you be?" he counters, careful to hold himself very still.

There's energy crackling in the way Tom moves now, some intangible weight to the air, like even the room itself has woken up and is watching.

What did he have to give up to get *this*?

"It went well," he says simply, hand dropping as he answers Harry's unasked question. "I have what I need, we'll perform the ritual tomorrow."

Harry blinks in surprise; he didn't expect it to be so quick. He swallows. "It just… gave it to you?"

Tom smiles, and it's beautiful and terrible. "Yes. Voldemort gave it to me."

Something is strange. Tom's previous warning rings through his head: *don't let me feed from you.*

Harry shifts back against the headboard, trying to at least put some scant distance between them. He feels vulnerable like this, in his thin nightshirt, still damp with sweat.

"Tomorrow then?"

"Only a few more things need to be set," Tom says. "I will come and fetch you when it's time."

Harry nods—what else can he do? The hope he once felt is absent. He just wants it over.

Satisfied, Tom rises from the bed, his long, graceful strides eating up the distance to the door. “Stay here,” he says. “Just one day.”

“Ok,” Harry says—lies. He’s too wary to prod a fight with this new Tom.

The door closes with a weighty click behind him.

Harry lets his weight fall back into the feather pillow and sighs. The entire exchange only lasted a few minutes, and his sleep-addled mind is still catching up.

Tom did the deal. Tom will free himself of Voldemort. Tomorrow. That’s just hours away.

And what did he mean by ‘a few more things need to be set?’.

*

The next morning is a beautiful, bright day. Buttery sunlight spills across the floor as the sun stretches and Harry squints as he wakes, throwing an arm over his eyes.

He dresses quickly, moving on autopilot to grab the knife from where he’s hidden it in the wardrobe and grab an apple from the lavish bowl of fruit on the coffee table.

He looks left and right down the corridor as he slips out of the room, relieved to see nothing but portraits of stern men and women. Then he feels a bit ridiculous: what did he think, that Tom would be waiting to catch him out?

There’s still a tiny bite of guilt as he makes his way down the hall, heading west again as he eats his apple. Tom, *his* Tom, would have known he was lying, he consoles himself. And besides, what’s going to happen in a day? Draco has been scared off, and even if he’s not, Harry has his knife this time. He’s not a pet, he’s not going to sit there and wait for Tom to fetch him when he feels like it.

From an alcove nearby he watches Lucius' study, waiting until enough time has passed that he feels safe in picking the lock once again. It's easier this time now that he has a better idea of where the pins are, and he’s in in a matter of minutes.

He quickly takes stock. There’s nobody around but the desk surface is messier now, more sheafs of paper piled on top. The chairs have been rearranged too, one of them turned to face the window with its back to the other.

Lucius is back then.

He doesn't waste time. He opens the bookcase and steps inside.

Back in that horrible, dark corridor, he takes a moment to just breathe. For some reason the anxiety is back, worse than before, and he’s actually starting to sweat despite the temperature.

This time, he switches on the light. It flickers to life, illuminating the space with a sickly yellow glow. The corridor doesn't look as disused as he first imagined, there's dust but thankfully no sticky cobwebs, and what he had assumed to be a stone floor is actually dark wood.

Once again, the small, lonely door at the end of the tunnel beckons him, the bars throwing lines of shadow across what little he can make out inside as he walks towards it. Surprisingly, the smell isn't so bad this time. It remains, a lingering whisper of decay, but it's not so overpoweringly awful as he remembers. It's still unpleasant though, and he resigns himself to breathing in through his mouth.

He wanders in through the door. With the light from the corridor, he can now see another light switch for the room so he flicks it.

Sterile lighting blinks on from regular intervals across the ceiling. Harry looks around curiously. It's not quite the storeroom he'd thought it was. It extends back quite a way, the ceiling rising up in a graceful stone arch. There's what looks like a fire pit off to the side, chimney disappearing up through the roof, but by far the most noticeable thing are the shelves. They cover the walls, stretching back as far as he can see, littered with strange objects. Some of them are books, although when Harry picks them up he can't recognise the language. There are fragrant dried herbs, bottles of insects, drowned in some clear liquid, strange metal instruments, and what looks like an industrial amount of kitchen equipment. A few huge steel tables dominate the space near one wall, almost like a hospital operating theatre.

It's a weird blend of laboratory, library and kitchen.

It gets darker. What is obviously a store of blood lies boxed away on the ground—these are the rows of bottles he saw the first time he came. There are also what look like... fingers, Harry realises with a wave of sickness. Human fingers, at least thirty, all thrown in together like shrivelled pale worms in a square glass container. He has the shuddering realisation that they must be at least somewhat fresh if decay hasn't set in.

He looks to find the shadowy shape he remembered being near the door, but either whatever it was has been moved, or he's misremembering.

Something catches his eye. There’s a large table tucked in the corner, wooden instead of metal like the others. It has a strange black squiggle on the surface in the middle, and as he steps up to it he realises it’s a rune. Seared in perhaps, he wonders, tracing the bumpy black swirls with the tip of his finger. Near the rune lies a single sheet of paper with tattered edges, like it’s been ripped from a book. He frowns down at it. It’s just a map of London, after all, with a few scribbles. Three dates are printed neatly on the side, and he can't help but recognise the way Tom crosses his sevens. He runs his finger over it, trying to understand. One is from a couple of months ago, the next five weeks ago. The other is yesterday's date.

He looks at the other marks. There are neat dots which have been crossed out over east London. And then a cluster, just outside, to the North. He peers closer. Why does it seem so familiar?

The words resolve themselves: **LITTLE HANGLETON**.

That's that town that had been bombed, wasn't it? That strange upside down T-shape. It's been marked on the map, that's clear to see, only more have been added: two on either side of the T to make a weird, bisected triangle. Only Tom has drawn a circle around the whole thing.

Harry barely notice his hands trembling as he feels around in his trousers and takes out the crinkled paper. The symbol he'd copied from Lucius' desk stares mockingly out at him.

What the hell is going on? Why does Lucius have this as well? He looks at it but there's an obvious answer staring him in the face.

It's a rune, isn't it?

He has to put both his palms on the table to stop the light headedness that swims through him. Thoughts flit through his head, each one leading to another.

Tom and Lucius may have been responsible for the deaths of Little Hangleton. It may have been a rune for the ritual tonight... or, what is more likely, is that is it the sacrifice Tom needed to manoeuvre a third deal with Voldemort.

He thinks of all the times Tom has gone missing during the day or night, the times he comes back smelling like smoke and satisfaction, and bites down on his lip so hard he might taste blood.

The first bombings were months ago, which means he'd planned the deal from the start. He knew he'd need Voldemort's help, didn't he? And that's why he's been so adamant to keep Harry away from it, because of course Harry would have tried to stop it.

What's the point in fixing his soul, Harry thinks blankly, *if it's so black and mangled by the end of it?*

He backs away from then table and slides down the wall, needing to sit down for second. It puts the box of fingers right in his line of sight. There's a terrible moment of taking stock, where all the madness, all the horror of the last two years seems to leap out all at once and something in him just cracks.

His next inhale shudders on a gasp, eyes suddenly wet, and his hands come up to claw at his chest, tight and aching like he can't breathe. What the fuck is happening? Of all the things he's seen, everything he's done, this is not the time or place to break down and yet it's here, in this weird room, in a strange, gothic manor, that his shoulders start to heave as he sobs. He lets it go, all his concern for Tom, how disgusted he feels at how fucking placid he's been, the way he's starting to think it might have been a mistake to bring him back.

In reality, Harry is responsible for the forty three deaths the papers had reported—more, if that map is to be believed. He killed them. He's the one who called Voldemort first, he's the one who pushed Tom to come to London.

Seventeen years on the planet and all he's done is end things.

It takes him twenty minutes of forcing ragged, stale breaths into his lungs, staring at a spot on the floor and forcing his mind to pick itself up and shove back together, but eventually his limbs start to cooperate. Shaky, he forces himself up to standing.

Now he just feels empty, all the those feelings of frustration and fear from before seem to have dissolved along with his tears.

He notices another door on the left hand side, small, innocuous. Harry wipes his eyes as he walks over and pulls it open.

The corridor looks much the same as the other one. Probably tunnels that run throughout the manor, the property is certainly old enough that it's not too surprising.

Stay here, Tom had said. Stay here whilst I rip myself apart and enact massacres.

He turns off the light in the room and steps out through the new door, into the gloom.

There are no convenient lights for this corridor, but as he begins to follow it deeper into the house, the more he begins to feel an odd sense of weightlessness. He's so tired of feeling afraid, he's reached his limit, and now he just... can't bring himself to care anymore. It's very freeing.

Eventually, he reaches another door. He's been walking for long enough that he decides to push it open. What's the worst that can happen? Draco? Lucius?

Somehow they're not so scary anymore.

The room he finds himself in is feminine in a way he hasn't quite seen yet in this place. The heavy curtains are drawn, a soft glow of light just slipping around the edges and despite the musty smell it's almost cosy. One of the walls is taken up by a huge portrait, nearly the length of Harry himself. He walks closer, curious despite himself.

She's not hard to recognise. Lucius' wife is beautiful, pink lips curving in a kind smile, creases under her almond shaped eyes. Long blonde hair spills down her shoulders, glinting like spun gold in the soft light the artist has chosen. She looks like Draco, with her fine features and long eyelashes. Her eyes are a steely grey though, and he wonders if that's what Draco's would be like if they weren't red.

NARCISSA DRUELLA MALFOY the plaque reads.

Harry's smile fades as he remembers what Tom had told him, and he thinks about what it must have been like in those final few moments, the slow, horrifying realisation that Lucius

had tried to kill the baby she was giving her life to deliver, and then the understanding that he'd done something far worse.

What does it mean when someone's sacrificed—does the witch eat them? Take their soul like it has done to Tom, and the Malfoys? Where does it go? What happens to it?

"You're not supposed to be in here," a voice singsongs from behind him.

Harry jumps, head whipping round.

Draco lounges against the doorframe, polished shoes wet with mud and trench coat unbuttoned. He's come back from London, Harry guesses, and then searches his face for any sight of bruising from Tom's blow.

There's nothing, just smooth white skin.

Draco sets his hat down on the dresser to the side, and steps towards him. Something in his unnaturally smooth gait reminds Harry of Tom, although he quickly banishes the thought.

"You again," Harry says guardedly.

"Still so rude," Draco sighs, but he doesn't sound like he minds. "And this is the second time I've found you somewhere you shouldn't be."

"I got lost," Harry says. He refuses to step backwards this time, even as Draco comes to stand uncomfortably close to stare at the marks he left on Harry's neck.

"You're lying," Draco whispers.

"I'm not," Harry says as calmly as he can. "I got lost, I was looking for Tom."

Draco seems to stiffen at his name, but he also leans back.

"Tom, Tom, Tom," Draco mimics, eyeing him. "Of course you did," he scoffs, but then seems to change his mind. "Although you didn't know… can't be helped if little Potter doesn't know."

Harry watches uncomfortably, recoiling a little as Draco passes him with a purposefully deep inhale to sit down on the edge of the bed. He looks comically out of place sitting on the floral silk, still with mud on his boots and hair greased back.

"I'll tell you a secret," Draco smiles, looking around the room. "I like to come in here sometimes, when I get bored at night. I imagine mother on this bed, right here," he says fondly, patting the sheets wistfully, "imagine her bleeding out for me, her pain a gift to me, to give me life."

Harry stares at him and carefully keeps his expression blank. *He's mad*, he realises, horrified. *He's a complete fucking nutcase.*

“I need to go,” he says, voice scratchy. He’s already walking, back to the door Draco entered from, his hand on the handle.

He tries to turn it but there’s an ominous click and the door doesn’t budge.

It’s locked. He didn't even see Draco do it. The back of his neck prickles and he turns around.

Draco is still sitting on the bed, but his smile grows wider at Harry's look of confusion. “I want to talk to you,” he says.

“I want to leave, Draco. Unlock the door.”

Draco acts like he hadn’t heard him. “You know… you and Riddle,” he says the name with utter disdain, “you’ve been causing quite some trouble. I suppose you think I’m a fool, do you?”

Harry’s heart begins to sink.

“Yes you do. But I’m not a fool, I can see what you’re doing, this little game that you’re playing.”

“Game?” Harry repeats, swallowing.

“The way you’re manipulating my father, making him do all your dirty work.”

Harry shakes his head. “There’s no manipulation. Trust me, we don't want to be here any more than you do.”

Draco's mouth tugs down into a frown and he rises up from the bed. For someone that looks so young, his sheer aura is pretty imposing.

There’s no reply, but he crosses the room inhumanly fast. Harry blinks and he’s right in front of him, grabbing hold of his shoulder, keeping him locked in place.

The backs of Draco's fingers stroke the side of his face, and Harry has a moment of complete incredulity, because that gesture is almost—

"You have no idea,” Draco breathes, “how much I could make you want it.” His eyes don't look human anymore, expression slowly turning dreamy. His fingers drop and Harry sees a flash of silver in his other palm, right before Draco's features flicker.

He's just sliced his palm open, Harry realises with disgust and a bit of horror. There's black blood dripping out, a slow trickle, too thick to be normal.

"I could have you begging me," he whispers, hand coming up to grip onto Harry's hair, pulling his head until he's forced to meet his eyes.

"Go fuck yourself," Harry bites out harshly, but his eyes meet Draco's all the same.

The redness is fading, incrementally, replaced by something darker. He's stuck looking into it, heart thudding as he sees something in there, swimming in the fever bright shine of the pupils. His own reflection? No, it can't be, it looks nothing like him. He draws closer, frowning as silence starts to fill his ears.

The tiny prick of pain on his forearm doesn't really register, he's too busy trying to see it. *Who are you?*, Harry wants to ask but before the words can leave his mouth he stiffens in shock.

It's not human, whatever it is. Peering up from the depths of Draco's pupils is a grinning skull-like head, a forked tongue flicking out over it's thin lips.

Harry lets out a strangled noise, desperately trying to pull away, but for some reason he can't move.

Salazar... the hiss slips through his mind, down his spine to echo in his head, louder and louder until he wants to scream. At the same time he begins to feel hot, dizzy. Aroused, somehow, as disgusting as he finds it. The bright pain in his arm grows but the feeling just sharpens the sweetness.

I can give you whatever you want, the hiss licks up his ears, down his neck. *Don't you want to be stronger Harry? I can give you power, wealth… I can make sure he never leaves your side...*

Time hangs suspended, seconds passing into minutes, and all the while the face seems to drink him up, filling his vision. It's beautiful, heady and hot, and Harry finds himself starting to want it, to want to take it in, bait it with anything he can. He starts to reach towards it, fingertips outstretched—

"No!" Harry hears, a vehement shout, and then his body shocks against the floor.

He blinks to find Draco staring down at him, face screwed up in agitation. He's just hit him, right across the face.

"No," he repeats, crouching to grab Harry's shoulders and shake them. "You're not allowed to do that. It's *mine*."

Harry's eyes fall to his lips, too red to be natural, and then realises that the growing pins and needles in his arm is because he's bleeding. There's a ragged bite mark near his wrist, bright red liquid pumping out. Draco sighs, pinning him down with a knee and flexing his cut hand.

"You're going to have to do this," he informs Harry blandly, eyeing his wound. "Or else I'll get in trouble with father."

Harry can't move, skin still writhing from that horrible, intrusive presence. He feels shaky, violated.

"Was that," he gets out, voice thin, "was it…""

"Yes," Draco says slowly, "it was."

That's all he gets, and then Draco's hand is sealed over his mouth and nose. Harry bucks up, trying to unseat him, desperately clamping his mouth closed. Draco has the same strange, superhuman strength that Tom does though, and he seems to watch Harry struggle in amusement, before growing bored. The pressure on his chest increases until Harry thinks he hears his ribs creak, lungs burning with the need to breath.

Draco's other hand grips his jaw, so hard he's sure it'll leave bruises, and yanks it open.

Copper blooms on his tongue, metallic and hot, and it only takes a second for the urge to gag to turn into something much different. Harry grabs Draco's hand, pushing it into his face as his tongue explores the feeling of shredded flesh, lapping up the liquid. It's not that it's delicious, not at all, but the feeling he gets, like all his blood is rushing through his body, like his muscles have suddenly woken up. It's addictive.

"I told you," he hears softly, but ignores it.

It's too good to focus on Draco, all he wants to do is keep chasing that feeling, keep drinking it—

Harry’s heart lurches as suddenly it’s wrenched away from him.

"No, no, Harry," Draco says with a smile, holding his hand out of reach. "I told you I wanted you to beg me.

He feels sick with how much he wants it. He shakes his head instead, sits on his hands.

"Why are you doing this?" he manages, hating how drugged his voice sounds. His tongue keeps flicking into the crevices of his teeth without his permission, chasing the taste. "He made another deal. He's going to kill you for this.”

He has to force himself to stay still, not to crawl forward, back to where Draco kneels.

“Oh,” Draco says, beginning to grin. “Oh, you don't realise, do you?”

"What?" Harry asks, uneasy.

Draco tinkles out a laugh, looking for all intents and purposes like the cat that got the cream. "That reaction," he prods, smirking eyes intently watching Harry's expression.

"What are you talking about?”

"You must have had quite a lot," Draco replies. "Of his blood," he adds in at Harry's look of confusion. "He's fed you probably too much, you know, if you were so easy to tempt with mine."

Harry suddenly feels cold. Tom's blood? But he's only had it, what, three times? Twice when they were in Africa, and, well, that time Tom had healed what he'd taken.

“You’re lying,” Harry tells him, but it's not as venomous as it should be. His brain is still reeling.

Now that he thinks about it, the first blood he'd drank had been disgusting, all thick and salty, and then the world had gone grey around the edges and he'd passed out. There had been no pleasure, nothing like—like what Draco had just done.

So… had there been other times? Other times that he'd been asleep, or passed out, Tom taking what he wanted and Harry not knowing, healed with a splash of his own blood?

He suddenly feels ill, wants nothing more than to wipe the taste from his mouth. Tom had said that too much could drive him insane, and he can't help but make the connection to the worsening nightmares, the way sometimes he hears the rattle of machine guns in silent rooms, how his hands now constantly shake and that he's always, always so *tired*.

"And I bet he didn't tell you the best part, either," Draco continues, looking more and more amused.

Harry stares at him.

"That blood is only part of it. The real part, the best part, is the *pain*."

Chapter End Notes

and so it begins!

annoyingly i have chapter 20 all written out (shit goes d o w n), but none of 19 so depending on tiredness/motivation will try to type it up over the next week :)

hope you're enjoying so far, and thank you all for sticking with me on this, i know there was a long hiatus in the middle of this story and that i update quite erratically, but i really really appreciate it!

anyway have the best week and see you soon x

witches

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Harry manages to get his feet under him, legs unsteady. "What do you mean 'the pain'?"

Draco giggles. "They're witches, Harry, not Dracula. It's not intrinsically about the blood. It's the violation of God's work, the sacrifice. When he tears into you, steals the very thing that gives life to every part of you, and you let him..." he stares at Harry's forearm where the smears of blood are the only indication of his wound. "That fear, that self-loathing," his eyes flutter shut. "Delicious."

There's a moment of incredulity, the words sinking in like barbed hooks, and then Harry's temper boils over, the wave of anger building too fast for him to control. His body moves reflexively, knife suddenly in his hand as he lunges for Draco. He wants nothing more than to rip the stupid, poncey smirk off his face, like if he can at least do this, remind himself that he's got some power too, then maybe he wouldn't feel so fucking helpless all the time.

Draco snorts, casually sidestepping at a speed Harry's eyes can't follow. He grabs the hand with the knife and squeezes.

Harry's fingers open on reflex, knife cluttering to the floor and narrowly missing his feet. He yanks his arm, trying to shove Draco off him but the muscles in that slim frame are packed with strength, and Draco easily holds him in place.

Malfoy pulls him closer, nose skimming Harry's collarbones as he inhales. "I can smell your fear," he whispers, drawing back to look into Harry's face, red eyes wide. "Go on, I want to hear you scream."

His grip tightens down on Harry's wrist, so hard he can feel the bones begin to creak as they're ground together. He clenches his lips shut, refusing to make any noise as his hand begins to crumple.

There's a sudden noise, a bang as the door flies into the wall, and Harry looks up, straight into the stony face of Tom. Draco lets go of him immediately, flitting to a few paces away and regarding Tom cautiously.

From his vantage point he can't read Tom's expression, but he moves quickly, straight to Harry. Cold hands gently examine his wrist, the touch feather-light as it moves to his other arm, drawing it up to the light. Tom's fingers run over the unblemished skin where Draco had bitten down, his head tilting as he considers the surrounding blood. It doesn't take him long to arrive at the black stains on the corner of Harry's mouth, the faint mark on his chin.

"I see," Tom says softly, thumb coming to swipe through the mess. The look on his face is strange as he regards the colour left on the pad of his finger. His eyes settle on Draco. "You."

Draco looks wary to be called out. "Yes?" he sneers, "do you have a question for me, Rid—“

That's all he manages to say before his wrists are snapped backwards, hands suddenly protruding the wrong way in their sockets. He gapes for a moment, face contorting first in shock and then his mouth drops open as he starts to scream. Harry didn't even see Tom move but in the blink of an eye he's now a few feet away, arm dropping from where he'd broken the bones.

"What have you—” Draco gasps out brokenly, but then Tom has his fingers wrapped around his neck.

The action looks casual as he tosses Draco's entire body to the side, but it's done with so much strength that when his torso punches into the dresser the wood splinters with an almighty crash.

Harry jerks away, the sound of the bone breaking echoing through his head, a horrible grinding snap. Tom strolls over and picks up the struggling body, unfazed by Draco's curses.

"Draco," Tom says conversationally. "Dear, jealous Draco." He holds him up with one hand until Draco's feet are kicking the air, face turning purple. "We've had this conversation before, quite recently. Do you remember?"

Draco's too busy choking to reply. Harry can't tell whether it's because Tom has given away more of himself but the sheer difference in their power is obvious.

"No? Maybe I can remind you."

Tom lets his body drop and Draco's on his knees in a flash, sucking in air and coughing.

"Father will destroy you," he rasps between wheezes. "No, I think I'll kill you both, him first and I'll make you watch." With that he whirls, lunging at Harry with surprising speed.

Tom gets there first.

There's a blur of movement and a sickening crack, and Harry leans closer as he tries to work out what just happened. Tom's body shifts and suddenly the mangled mess of Draco's left leg becomes visible.

Harry stops breathing, eyes widening at the tangle of white and red. Did he just *stamp through the bone*?

Draco wails, turns to the side and vomits. It's a slew of bright red, sinking into the dusty carpet. Harry looks to Tom, who watches, satisfied.

"As I was saying," he continues calmly, "I told you, very clearly, that if you touched him again there would be consequences. And yet, here we are." He waves a hand elegantly at the sprawled body on the floor, sneering down.

Harry's breath catches. Like this, Tom is... well, he's terrifying. This Tom could burn the world down and not feel an ounce of remorse. He seems impenetrable, like all the softness in

him has been burnt away.

Tom grabs Draco by his white hair. "I suppose it doesn't really matter, we may as well begin now."

"Go to hell," Draco groans, spitting a wad of blood. His face is grey, screwed up in pain, but his eyes are still bright with anger.

Tom chuckles. “Three times were more than enough for me." His eyes slide from Draco to Harry, flat against the wall. He can’t help the flinch.

“Harry,” Tom says, “come with me now.”

There’s no room for negotiation. He swallows and nods, wordlessly stepping over the stains on the floor to follow Tom out the room. His body seems to be moving on autopilot, mind blank. He has absolutely no idea what to expect as Tom strides down the corridor, jerking Draco after him, pulled along despite his leg and broken wrists.

Their destination is close by, a tall, imposing door, clearly leading to a large hall of some sort. Tom kicks it open, and immediately Harry is hit with the smell.

Draco lets out an ear-splitting shriek but remains limp in Tom's grip, letting himself be marched over to one of three blood-inked circles on the floor. Each circle is just about large enough for a man to lie down in, the line interrupted at odd intervals with more of the strange runes that Harry is growing increasingly familiar with.

One of them has something in, something that reeks in a terrible, familiar way. He has a horrible sneaking suspicion of what he's looking at, and Draco's distraught reaction only confirms it.

"Narcissa," Harry tests, looking to Tom who discards Draco in the circle and steps back.

Draco's limbs seem to come up against some invisible wall, locking him inside. Malfoy sobs, horrified, whole body oriented towards the other circle but unable to move.

"Almost," Tom snorts, glancing over at the body. "Not for lack of trying."

It's such a cruel dismissal, and Harry can't help but peer down, struggling to recognise any of the portrait in what lies on the floor.

"How was she alive?" he asks quietly.

"She wasn't," Tom scoffs. "He was trying to reanimate her.”

Jesus Christ. He has to step back again, too close to bear the smell, but he can't drag his eyes away.

"How?" Harry can't help but blurt out, incredulously. "There's no way to bring her back, right?" He gulps, suddenly unsure. Is that possible? Can a witch do that?

It seems he guesses correctly as Tom tosses his head and laughs. "They were going to double cross us," he says dismissively. "Strike a deal with Voldemort and use me as a bargaining chip. That's what they tried to do with the other witchlings they've found, but these idiots can't even get a simple ritual right."

Harry's gaze shifts from the mound of papery bones and sinew to the circle surrounding it, suddenly catching on the colour of the line. His voice comes out thin, full of trepidation.

“…Who's blood is that?"

"Human," is the only response he gets, and then Tom is crouching down next to Draco. "Go on," he says softly, "call him."

Harry looks to Draco in confusion, who glares up at Tom. For a second his eyes meet Harry's, rage screaming out from his bared bloody teeth. *I'll kill you*, the look says, like it's a promise, and Harry has no doubt that if he wasn't trapped in the wards he would be on him in an instant.

"Don't make me ask again." The words are dangerously even, and Draco chokes on a sob, before going still.

It's only for a few seconds, but something jerks through his body and when he opens his eyes the pupils flash like two pale moons. Whatever he's done, it seems to have satisfied Tom, as he stands fluidly, stalking over to Harry.

Harry raises his eyebrows in question, hiding his trembling hands in his pockets.

"The other one,” Tom says, taking hold of Harry's shoulders and steering him to his own circle. “Stay here,” he says, placing a palm on Harry's chest and resting it there for a few seconds.

As he walks away, Harry’s hit with the realisation that he was feeling his heart beat.

They wait, the only sounds the occasional sniffle from Draco, who keeps murmuring his mother's name under his breath. Harry can't help but look, morbid curiosity overtaking his revulsion.

She's barely formed, a mishmash of body parts hidden under an old-fashioned dress, the lace horribly juxtaposed to the dead skin. Her eyes are pure white as they stare unseeingly up at the ceiling, rotting, lilac lips parted to reveal two strangely perfect rows of white teeth. She reeks, and even from the other side of the room he can taste it in his throat, a thick foul smell that makes him want to cover his nose.

That's all he manages to see before an enraged howl echoes through the hall. Lucius has arrived.

Tom moves quickly. As soon as Lucius steps into the room Tom is on him, limbs blurring as he kicks at the older man's knees, hard enough to snap them in two. Lucius is faster than Draco though, side-stepping and grabbing hold of Tom's arm. Harry sees the strain on his

face as Lucius jams it, obviously intending to pop it out, but then Tom's twisting, gets hold of Lucius' hair and uses it to smash his face down, into the stone floor.

"You filth," Lucius spits as he rises, blood streaming down one side of his face from a cut on his forehead. He looks absolutely livid, chest heaving as his eyes flit from Narcissa's corpse to Draco, broken on his knees. "How?"

Harry thinks back to how the bookcase hadn't been locked when he'd found it. Thinks about the crumbling lock in his study.

Tom has always been better at him at picking locks.

Tom seems amused. "Followed the stinking scent of desperation," he mocks. "Really, what did you think you were going to achieve? She's gone, Lucius. That," he says, stepping to the side to kick the rotting heap of flesh, grimacing as it squelches, "is just offal. Good for the pigs and nothing more."

Predictably, Lucius turns white with rage. "First my wife," he bites out softly, stalking forwards, "then my son, and now my turn has come, I suppose?"

His hand disappears into his pocket and Harry catches a familiar flash of metal. He's about to call out but Tom sees it too, darts to the side just quickly enough for the bullet to miss him, the clap of the trigger loud enough that for a few seconds Harry can just hear a high pitched ringing. *Ah*, he thinks with some degree of nostalgia, waiting for the noise to clear. He's missed the largest threat in the room being a simple weapon.

Tom seems to have grown tired of goading him. In a moment he's across the room with Malfoy's gun in hand. With the speed of someone trained to do it, he punches the trigger three times in quick succession.

All of them hit Malfoy in the stomach. The worst place to be shot, Harry knows.

Three deals, he has to remind himself. Tom's has had to offer a lot of himself up for this kind of speed and strength.

Despite the leaking stomach, Lucius still manages to catch him off guard. Just as Tom takes hold of him, he spits a wad of blood into his eyes, raking his fingers down Tom's face. He's obviously aiming to blind, but Tom manages to throw him into the final circle, moving so that the blow ends up shredding the side of his jaw instead of his eyes, nails tearing three long rivets down his neck.

Lucius clatters into the circle, immediately locked in. Sneering, Tom raises a hand the the wound, feeling the torn skin. His tongue darts out, tasting the blood, and he turns to Lucius, eerily silent.

The older Malfoy has gone still, eyes stuck on the runes surrounding him. His gaze is flitting back and forth, eyes widening as he reads them, and as Tom stalks over his head shoots up, face filled with horror.

"This is… you *fool*, you don't know what you're doing," he hisses, eyes wide around the edges.

Tom's cold laugh cuts through the air. "I know exactly what I'm doing."

Lucius face is white, sprayed red in places. He stares at Tom like he's the devil himself. "All this time," he says, stunned. "I thought we were… I thought you were going to fix it."

"Yes, well, clearly you thought wrong," Tom says, bored.

Harry's brow furrows. What does that mean?

As if reading his mind, Tom turns to Harry. "This what was missing—do you see? We needed them."

"This is what Voldemort told you," Harry is suddenly sure. "Not the runes."

It makes sense, he supposes. To split the soul requires human sacrifice, so to mend it again clearly requires something more, something different. He wonders if he should feel any compassion for the creatures about to die. But… all he feels is a kind of scared excitement. They've come so far. It's been months, and now…

Now Tom is going to be whole again.

"What are you going to do?" he asks, edging closer to his own bloody boundary. He's a little uncomfortable with how he seems to be the fourth player hemmed in by Tom. Surely it's safe to step out now?

Tom pins him with an intense look. "Don't," he says pointedly, before turning to regard Draco, who sits with his broken wrists in his lap, watching with hate-filled eyes.

He walks over to Draco's circle, lips curling as he withdraws a long, serrated dagger from his pocket, unflinchingly using it to draw a deep gash on his hand. With the blood that seeps out, he uses it to add runes to what is already painted there, moving efficiently from left to right. The pattern seems completely arbitrary but Tom seems to have memorised it; his fingers never stop moving, complicated rune after complicated rune.

After a few moments he finishes, which apparently coincides with Lucius finally understanding what it is Tom intends to do with Draco.

"Riddle," Lucius calls out, the words bleached with fear. "You cannot."

"I think I can."

"You have no idea what it is you're playing with here, it's more than you—"

Lucius' frantic shout cuts off as Tom steps through the wards he's so painstakingly woven, and grabs Draco by the collar.

It all happens very quickly.

Tom's arm moves, the same one that held the dagger, and then Draco is screaming. Both Harry and Lucius go still at the sound, which in the next second drops off into a disturbingly quiet gurgling. Tom lets him go, swiftly stepping backwards out of the circle again, and Harry watches as the cut across Draco's throat opens up like a second mouth.

From his invisible prison, Lucius howls, fingers scrabbling impotently at the ground as his son thrashes and blood starts to spray, painting the space around him in a wide, abstract arc.

Tom's red eyes shine with intrigue as Draco's choked whimpers start to die off, and his body begins to sink down into a strange, contorted slump on the floor.

For a few moments, Harry is confused, heart beating wildly against the walls of his ribs. Why did he go to the trouble of painting all those runes just to slit his throat?

And then Draco's body snaps up into sitting.

His eyes are black, lips stained the same colour, and the way his limbs jerk make him look like a macabre marionette, some invisible hand pulling the strings. His broken legs unfold until he totters into an upright stand, face expressionless. Blood drips down from his neck, a pitter patter rainfall of red.

"Oops," Tom says under his breath as Draco steps cleanly through the wards towards them.

"Oops?" Harry repeats incredulously, drawing the knife out of his pocket and switching his grip.

Did his wards fail? Because it seems like they did. And if the ones he drew to keep Draco in don’t work, Harry is sure as hell not going to rely on his own to keep Draco out.

"A minor mistake," Tom grinds out tersely. "Stay back."

Harry glances at Lucius, but the older Malfoy is sitting back on his haunches, staring blankly in front of him as the tears slide off his jaw to land on the floor. Then hehas to look away, because there's a slam of air and suddenly Draco is at Tom's throat, grinning savagely. Maybe it's the fact that he must have lost at least half the blood in his body, but the bones in his face seem to leap out of the skin, cheekbones cutting lines through his smile and giving him a strange skull-like appearance. It's horribly familiar.

Tom's eyes narrow in contemplation, weight shifting subtly to the balls of his feet.

Draco, or whatever he is now, smiles, stained a horrifying black, and pivots. To Harry's horror, he lunges towards Harry, spinning across the room in a blur, inhumanly fast.

The only thing that saves him is the leg that Tom broke earlier. The torn muscle is physically unable to take the weight, and it leaves him at least at a traceable speed. Harry has just enough time to blink and then Draco's on him.

A clawed hand punches its way towards his heart, made even more macabre by the unnatural twist in the wrist socket. The fingers are curled in a way that Harry's sure if it connected would have torn away until the bone, but thankfully his military training kicks in.

He swerves, hunkering down low, using Draco's momentum to push the other past him. At the same time, he stabs quickly with the knife to gash a deep wound in his torso, grunting as he kicks the body away.

It doesn't really work. If Draco was human, he would undoubtedly be dead by now, but the thing that he has become cackles in amusement, body rigid, absorbing the force of his kick.

Harry has a moment of complete and utter panic as Draco turns, cocks his head and thrusts towards him. *Why did he think a fucking knife would work?* And then somehow he's flying backwards, slamming into the wall so hard the breath is driven from his lungs.

For a split second he desperately tries to categorise his body—where is the wound, what limb is he missing—before his head shoots up at a loud crash.

Tom is standing where Harry was, back to him. Harry follows his line of sight to the opposite end of the room, where Draco is once again enacting the creepy pulled-string jerk into standing.

Harry looks down at himself. He's fine, aside from being tossed into a wall. Tom must have thrown him backwards and grabbed Draco.

Watching them fight each other is a reminder that whatever they are, it's not quite human anymore. It's vicious. Draco is swiping, biting, filled with an inexhaustible energy that keeps him tearing at Tom with anything he can. He still has that strange strength, and any object around the room that gets in their way is splintered in a second.

It's easy to see that Tom is still on another level though. It doesn't take Harry long to realise that he's playing. Whatever it is that's occupying Malfoy is working with a half ruined vessel, and Tom has made three times the bargains he has. His movements are almost like a dance, weaving in to cut slash after slash, expression wild and gleeful as Draco starts to falter.

"I've never killed a witch before. Or, whatever it is that you are," Tom muses as he shoves the knife into Draco's eye. Draco doesn't scream, just lets out a punchy little laugh-gasp, a strange ticking noise coming from his throat.

For some reason, the single remaining black eye moves, leering at Harry, and for a split second they slide past him to the left, before it's back to Tom and Draco screams, ear-piercingly shrill.

Harry turns his head, following the path of that chilling gaze, and realises too late Lucius has been strangely quiet for the last five minutes.

The noises of Tom lazily and systematically ripping Draco apart fade, replaced by the sound of blood rushing in his ears.

Lucius kneels, face ashen and resigned, in a pool of his own blood. There's that same weird triangular symbol painted on the floor in front of him, still within the bounds of Tom's ward, and with a deep inhale, he raises his head, looking Harry straight in the eyes as he continues

to mutter under his breath. For a second, Harry's convinced he can make out the last thing he says, lips curling around the word *run*—

And then Lucius' hand reaches into his own chest.

"Uh," the sound tumbles out of Harry's mouth before his throat closes up and he couldn't speak even if he wanted to.

Lucius smiles at him, dark and full of malice, and then his face twists in pain as his fingers tear through his ribcage, blood and gore spilling out, and he *wrenches.*

It's utterly, completely horrifying. Lucius' chest is a haggard, black hole, gristle and blood sweeping down his torso. His heart is clenched in his fist, so covered in blood that it's barely visible, and even as his body stills, collapses to the ground like a puppet with it's strings cut, Harry thinks he sees it pulse.

"Oh you little idiot," Tom breathes, although he sounds more entranced than fearful. Draco is still clawing at Tom, body a mess of wounds, blood smeared over his mouth and eyes black and foggy, but his movement are slowing.

"He," Harry tries, but the word comes out weak with shock, "What has he done?"

On the floor, Lucius' limbs starts to vibrate in a strange, silent contortion. Harry can't drag his eyes away, watches as the blood splattered on the floor seems to thin, grow lighter in colour. It takes a few moments, but eventually he realises.

It's moving, the blood reversing it's path until it trickles back into Lucius' mouth, into the wound, back through his eyes, his nose, ears, any possible route to his veins. Slowly, the hole where his heart had been grows even darker, liquid gathering and filling it like a cup, the blood writhing.

Tom starts to laugh. "He's called down Salazar," he says slowly, eyes bright with interest. "He's just killed himself for it, bartered whatever he had left."

"I thought Draco already had?" Harry questions, a little hysterically.

Tom shakes his head, gesturing at Draco. "No, this is just the shadow. This isn't a real witch." Out of the corner of his eye, Draco's frantic movements cease, and he stills, head turning eerily in their direction. Tom regards him warily. "But I suspect we may be about to meet one."

Harry watches as something begins to emerge from Lucius, the blood twisting together until it starts to nose it's way out of his chest. It's not blood, it's what looks like a fucking great snake, making its way out of the corpse. It's endless: coils and coils of it softly slithering down to the floor, even as Lucius' body starts to wither, like the husk of a cocoon.

It's not moving towards them. It's moving towards Draco, who is still frozen, entranced by the weaving witch.

"Get out of the way," Harry shouts, but he either ignores him or doesn't hear, just lets the thing sidle up to him.

All of a sudden it jumps, forcing its way into Draco's mouth. He chokes, eyes rolling back in his head as his hands fly up to scrabble at his throat.

"Oh, interesting," Tom murmurs dryly, licking his lips. His expression burns with something Harry can't place.

There's a moment of silence, before all the windows in the hall shatter with an ear-piercing crack. Harry's on his knees before he knows what's happened. It feels like gravity has just doubled, and his neck is straining just to keep his eyes on what's happening in front of him.

Where Draco was standing is now something much taller, a black shape towering up, about seven feet tall. It's limbs are spindly, too long to be human, and as it turns, Harry can't help but gasp in horror.

Its eyes are a burning golden colour, surprisingly humanlike... and fixed on Harry. There's a horrible grating sound coming from the black maw where its mouth should be, as it laughs.

Voldemort, it says as it turns to Tom.

The sound isn't something a human can produce; it rocks through him, all the hairs on his arms standing on end, a piercingly sharp discordant thrum.

This is a witch, he thinks, horrified. This is the thing that has eaten through Tom.

Chapter End Notes

sooooo... yeah

i think this is the most actiony action sequence i've ever written - lots of fighting, and a big turning point in the plot!

p.s. well done to all those who guessed it was narcissa in the study :D

parallel paths

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Oh I see, it intones, eyes unblinkingly moving over the symbols on the gleaming wooden floor. It seems so out of place in the midst of such an ostentatious hall, the light of the chandelier passing through it, blood splattered against the cream wall panels, priceless works of art smashed on the floor.

Is this a nightmare, Harry starts to ask himself desperately, frozen in place from his makeshift protective corner. This thing shouldn't exist, this shouldn't be real. Wake up, he pleads, pinching his arm. Wake the fuck up.

His heart almost stops as it looks at him again, peers into him like it's slitting him down the middle, turning him inside out to examine what it can find there.

What a shame, it whispers, and Harry can't tell if it's addressing Tom or him. *Voldemort's been having all this fun without me.*

Next to him, Tom begins to circle, soft steps ringing out in the quiet. He looks on edge, but there's still this odd curl of excitement, like he's eager to test out it's strength.

It's stupid, Harry thinks dully, resigned to the horror. The thing hasn't moved and even Harry can already sense that this is something far, far above them.

Tom launches himself forward, body a blur, but Salazar just smiles and swats him away with one hand, as easily as a fly.

Tom goes flying backwards, skidding across the ground until he regains his balance. When he looks up the smile has dropped from his face.

Why don't we make this a little more interesting.

Both Harry and Tom share a look of confusion as Salazar remains motionless, staring at them, before Tom's brow furrows and suddenly his eyes widen. He peers intently at Harry, face flashing with fear.

"Harry!” he snarls, reaching out, and for a split second Harry looks back, alarmed.

Then all he sees is black.

It sticks to his eyelids, smothering the front of his face, freezing cold and slimy, and the next thing he knows there's an insistent, agonising pressure at the corner of his left eye. He cries out, falling backwards, hands coming up to wipe frantically at where there's something wriggling into his head.

The cold feeling spreads, like it's splitting open his head, slipping down his throat, into his chest, unfurling until it's wormed its way into every corner and crevice of his body. He's numb, he can't feel himself anymore, like he's suspended in a water tank, floating, peering out from his own eyes like a passenger.

"What do you think?" he feels his mouth move, hears his voice echo through the hall.

Tom is looking at him in horror, the dagger in his hand lowering. Harry's head turns, and he watches Draco's shade smile again.

Harry laughs. "Isn't this wonderful?" he grins, hands coming up to stroke up and down his arms, holding them out in front consideringly. "What a beautifully *whole* body this is. Think of all the fun we can have!"

Harry has never felt terror so all-consuming before. Tom's impenetrable facade is starting to crack, Harry can see it. He's lost that smug confidence, is now watching ever so intently every move Harry makes.

"Get out of him," Tom bites hollowly, "get out of him right now."

His body sidles over to Tom, each step a suggestive prowl, until they stand opposite, Harry staring up to meet his eyes. "No, I don't think I will," he murmurs.

Harry tries desperately to open his mouth, to warn him, but he's flicked away easily. The heavy weight of his knife falls into his palm, still wet with Draco's blood, and he can only watch helplessly as his own body tries to stab Tom.

The other boy moves away, of course he does - Harry is still a human after all, and has none of his supernatural speed or strength. In response Harry just laughs delightedly, swiping again and again with the knife, going for Tom's throat, his arms, his torso. Again and again, Tom flashes away, making no attempt to return the attacks, just moving out of reach until eventually he grabs Harry's wrist and snatches the knife out of his hand.

"Stop," he grinds out.

Harry pouts, holding his hands up. "No?" he wheedles, as Tom regards him warily. "That's ok, there are plenty of ways we can play." He starts to unbutton Harry's shirt until it's gaping open at the chest, tugging on the collar to bare the shoulder with Tom's scar and batting his eyelashes suggestively. "I know what you do to this body," he says coyly. "I know what Harry craves, what makes him *tick*." He licks a stripe up his own shoulder, tonguing the initials there. "I know what this clever little tongue can do."

He sticks Harry's tongue out, like a naughty school child.

For a second, Tom looks as confused as Harry feels, and then Salazar makes it clear. His teeth come down, softly enough to trap the length between his incisors. He holds it there for a beat and then smiles prettily. "Well boys, what do you think? Shall I bite it off? I suppose it would be a shame, considering he's only just talking again."

Tom's face is ashen, lips pressed together in a pale line. "What do you want?" he asks tightly.

Harry nods along, like Tom's finally gotten the correct answer. "There we go. Now you're playing." Lazily, his eyes drop to the knife in Tom's hand, and he claps his hands together in excitement. Inside his own head, Harry has a moment of disbelief that an ageless (possible demonic) creature choses to act like an insane eight year old, and gets a flash of amusement in response.

Well if you insist, he hears in his head.

"I know, I know!" His body cries, face lighting up. He's really getting into role, Harry thinks weakly. "Let's play Simon Says. Obviously I'll go first."

Tom raises an eyebrow, prompting a little giggle; Harry has never heard his own voice sound so child-like. "Not this me, silly. That me." He nods over to Draco, still a black, spindly creature, standing completely still, staring at them.

Tom says nothing, just waits for Harry to get to the point.

"Ok, so Draco over there, he'll go first, just to make it easier for you. Then you can do it after him."

Tom looks some strange mix of wary and frustrated; Harry can tell he's weighing up his options, whether he could knock Harry out, incapacitate him somehow, but all Harry has to do is stick his tongue out and Tom's flinching, giving a short nod.

"Wonderful," Harry beams excitedly. "Ok, round one," he says as his smile darkens, spreads slow and syrupy across his face. "Simon Says... copy Draco!"

His body moves to settle against one of the remaining chairs to watch, and, like Tom, Harry can only observe, completely lost.

The shade seems to fade a little, shrinking so that Draco's body once again pokes out under it, cast in shadow. Dopily, he picks up his hand, and, without flinching, thrusts it through the gaping fucking hole in his leg, where Tom had stamped earlier. His hand squeezes in all the way, until his fingers stick out the other side, drenched in red.

Harry wants to throw up, has a horrible feeling of what's coming next. "Ok now your turn," his voice echoes.

Tom looks from Draco to Harry blankly, but the longer he remains frozen, the more the humour drops from Harry's face. "No," he says softly, lips curling down. "You're not playing properly."

The next second an all too familiar snap rings out. Harry looks down, sees his own finger pulled out of the socket, weirdly long now that it's been broken. He waits to feel the pain, but there's nothing. It's somehow even more disturbing.

"It's your first time, I suppose," he sighs, "I can give you another chance."

Tom is looking at him desperately, chest rising and falling quickly with anger. They stare at each other for a few moments, Tom's face sunken with disbelief. Evidently, it takes too long.

Snap.

Harry's forced to watch again, his ring finger now sticking out at a perpendicular angle. "Maybe his eyes next," he muses conversationally.

"Ok, ok, I'm doing it," Tom hisses, dropping to the floor in a kneeling position. His red eyes meet Harry's, like he knows Harry's still in there, is watching this all in grief-stricken horror as Tom's hand tightens around the knife and in the next breath-

-he plunges it through his thigh.

The leg buckles, Tom forced into a seated position with his legs in front of him, jaw clenching. He's right next to Narcissa, and he catches sight of her, grimacing in disgust but unable to move away.

Harry smirks, inching closer. "Wider," he croons. "Draco was a good boy - he fit his hand through. You can do that for me too, can't you?"

No, no, no, no, the word runs on an unending reel through Harry's head, heart tearing itself apart as Tom twists the knife in his leg, crying out this time. His eyes are the darkest Harry has ever seen them, and a strange little shudder runs through him, pained sneer settling.

"Oh I like that," Harry breathes. "Yes, that's right, use him. It's what we're for, after all."

Is he enlisting Voldemort? It doesn't matter - there's a wet grinding sound, and it seems despite the other Witch, Tom still lets out a gasp as his fingers force through his own thigh, blood pouring out over the floor.

"Beautiful, very good Tom." Harry chirps brightly, coming to crouch down next to him. "Look, now both of you match."

Tom's eyes are fluttering closed, and his face crumples as his hand comes back out, reaching down to the floor to steady himself from where he threatens to topple over, smearing the wood red. When he opens them again, he looks right into Harry's face, flinching.

Harry leans down and presses his lips to Tom's, rubbing them slowly, the barest imitation of a kiss. Gently, his hands reach out to push Tom's dark hair back off his forehead, and he places another soft kiss there, then his cheek, then his neck.

"I know you like it when he kisses your neck," Harry whispers confidentially, sucking on the skin there. Tom's breath is shuddering out of him, but he makes no move to stop Harry, gaze riveted on where his broken fingers lie at odd angles. "It's such a *shame* he'll never know what you were going to do for him."

At that Tom's eyes flick back up to Harry's. "What exactly are you getting out of this?" he manages to say.

Harry smiles. "It's obvious isn't it?" he answers, poking a finger into the hole in Tom's leg.

Tom cries out, stiffening in agony, as Harry withdraws it, popping the bloody tip into his mouth and sucking it. He hums in satisfactions, pupils huge.

"Give him back," Tom snarls, voice with a strange, cold reverberation.

Harry just looks even more pleased. "Oh hello there," he says. "That's what I want. Someone to *play* with." He straightens up, shoving his hands under Tom's armpits and yanking him upright, holding him as he staggers.

It takes a few moments for Tom to find his balance, and he totters to the left, almost falling before he catches himself on a small table nearby. The vase it was supporting crashes to the ground, damp peonies slopping over his feet, but both ignore it.

"Ready for round two?" Harry asks, bulldozing ahead. "Ok," he whirls around excitedly, cocking his head in operatic thought. "Simon Says..." he gives a dramatic pause. "Show me your liver!"

Harry's heart drops.

"This one's a bit trickier, you know, but I thought it's more fun to level up each time!"

Harry is hit with a distant urge to vomit as his eyes once again find Draco, standing there, dead but still moving. The whites of his eyes show, a slither of pupil at the top, giving him the appearance of someone looking upwards at the sky. He doesn't even use a knife, just tears straight into his abdomen, scooping and scooping until he thrusts something out at Harry, who peers closer.

"Hmm... no, I think that might be kidney, you know. Try again."

Draco obeys dumbly, there's another awful ripping noise, and he holds something else up, distinctly darker.

"Ok well, to be completely honest I'm not sure what you've got there. But seeing as you've tried so hard, we'll give you this one." Harry muses. Slowly, he turns to Tom, who is watching disgustedly, swaying a little.

"Tommy?" he croons dangerously. "Your go."

Tom's nostrils flare as he inhales. There's a pool of blood beneath him, a constant stream out of his leg, and his knuckles are white as they clench the edge of the table to keep him upright.

Harry tries as hard as he can to find that weird cold presence inside him and *push*, but nothing works. His limbs remain stubbornly locked, that stupid grin stuck on his face.

"Harry," Tom says thinly after a few moments. "I want Harry to do it."

Harry pauses, cocking his head appraisingly. "Oh," he says after a moment. "Oh, I *see*." He fingers the scar on his shoulder again. "Very romantic. Yes, that's rather sweet. Well, in reality it won't be Harry," he starts to walk towards Tom, who flinches, taking an unsteady step backwards, "it will be me. But you know, I appreciate the sentiment."

"I don't care," Tom says, beginning to pant. He takes another shuddering step away, like he can't help himself. He looks like he's about to faint.

Harry starts to smile, pleased. "Good," he says softly, stalking forward until they're chest to chest. Harry's waiting for the moment Salazar thrusts into him, but he seems to be enjoying the dramatics, ramping up the tension.

With trembling fingers Tom reaches out and takes hold of his jaw, ever so gently. Harry snorts, but lets him press their lips together, remaining still as Tom softly kisses him. He leans down, breath fanning over Harry's ear. Harry braces himself for whatever he's going to say, whatever awful apology he's going to make but then-

"Got you," Tom intones flatly.

Harry's eyes slide down past Tom's shoulder to the side, where the pile of Narcissa covers the intricately woven circle of blood, freshly added runes still glistening.

His elation flips to terror in a second as he realises that Salazar has latched on to the thought. It doesn't matter, it's too late - Tom grabs hold of Harry's body, easily swinging him round and switching their positions, pushing Harry into the circle.

There's a moment of panic, where the Harry trapped inside waits, feeling for anything that might indicate it's worked, and then his mouth opens and he *screams*.

All at once he can move again, and the feeling of his body slams into him. There's a sweet, sharp pain in his right hand suddenly, a stinging on the side of his tongue where his teeth have sunk in, and his knees almost buckle with the fatigue. He can't stop coughing, turning to the side and vomiting. The coldness has left him, but he can't help trying to expel whatever's in his stomach, eyes tearing up with the violation.

A gritty shriek intrudes on his trauma, and he looks up to see the shade retake Draco's body, bloody shape disappearing beneath black shadow. It's head shoots up and it grins, golden eyes blinking open.

Oh yes, it breathes in its strange inhuman voice. *Very good*.

"You know what this is, don't you?" Tom snarls in response, brandishing the dagger. His thumb moves, and suddenly Harry realises why the pattern on the hilt looks so familiar. It's almost the same as the knife in the desert, the one that Harry cut his hand with. Has he had that the whole time?

Salazar makes that inhuman noise again, grinding out in a shriek.

"Yes," Tom hisses, stalking closer, "that's right." That's all he says, before he's in the circle, and the knife is plunged into Salazar's chest.

Its black mouth opens, wide enough that it stretches to his chin and he howls.

Harry's heart is in his mouth, watching the oily black blood that slunk out of him slip quickly over the floor back to Salazar. "Tom, watch out!" Harry screams, feet skidding on the wood as he feels the runes' power slip, now that Salazar has left him.

He's too late. The slip of black rejoins the main Witch, and it seems to give it a last burst of strength. With another piercing shriek, the black shade twists, writhing, and another head bursts out of its chest, biting its way towards Tom. It lunges, eating away at his stomach, tearing off a mouthful of flesh.

Harry's never moved so fast. Suddenly he's across the room, panic eating up his movements as he sprints over, grabbing the knife out of Tom's hand, now lax, and shoving it into Salazar with a yell.

It seems to be enough - Salazar drops to the ground like liquid, leaving Draco's pale corpse sprawled inelegantly on the stone. There's a sizzling noise and the black oil starts to steam, a smell like burning hair filling the air.

The sudden silence is deafening, ringing in his ears, and so Harry can swear he hears the moment Tom falls.

His body sways, back hitting the wall behind him and sliding down until he crumples, arms clutched around his stomach. His face is bone-white, deep purple shadows hugging his eyelids. Harry's not even aware he's moving, but suddenly he's on his knees, catching the other boy in the cradle of his body.

"No, no, fuck, *not again*, come on Tom," he's saying numbly, hands hovering over Tom's wounds, "don't fuck around like this, you can't, *I can't*-" The damage is even more apparent up close: his whole side is shredded, weakly pumping out black sticky blood as his head tips back to rest against the wall with a thud.

"I just-," Tom tries to swallow, brows creasing in pain, "just wanted to become whole again for you," he gets out, spitting out another wad of blood. His breathing is unsteady, leg mangled underneath him.

Harry's heart cracks, a huge wrench inside him that comes out as a sob. "I know, Tom, I know," he chokes out, mind stuttering back and forth from the image in front of him to the newspaper-fuzzy photos of dead children, that long list of names, pages and pages of names, the Malfoy family lying shredded beside them. "All those people you killed," he stumbles, clutching his head and pulling on his hair, trying to *think*, fight through the mess of his feelings, "they were enough, weren't they? It was worth it, we're going to save you-"

"I had to," Tom pants, eyes opening to stare searchingly into Harry's. He seems to have misunderstood, trying to justify it when Harry *doesn't care* about that, just wants to save him.

"They were going to die anyway, it's a war, Harry. It was worth it, if it meant I wouldn't keep hurting you."

"I know, I know," he says desperately. He's shaking, mind feels like it's splitting apart. Tom's killed so many, so many for this. He's wrong though: this is different to the war, they're playing with things they don't understand, the consequences so much worse. And now-

"Malfoys," he gets out, "We were going to use them, we still can, can't we?"

Tom shrugs weakly, the tiniest shift of his shoulders, but he still winces, breath starting to stutter. "They were going to kill us," he whispers drunkenly. "I had to get to them first. I was protecting us, Harry."

"Fuck," he hisses, vision blurring. He blinks the wetness away, feels it roll down his cheeks. Nothing feels real - so much of what he's just seen is... *nightmarish*. But he already knows what he's going to do. There was never a fucking question. "Let me help you," he gasps angrily, breath quick as he leans over, places his neck next to Tom's mouth. "Please, let me help you, I need you with me, you can't leave," He closes his eyes, gently leaning his head on Tom's collarbone as he starts to tremble. "C'mon, take whatever you need, let's just *finish it*."

"*Harry,*" he thinks he hears, before a sharp pain flashes through the juncture between his shoulder and his neck and he cries out.

There's no finesse here - Tom is as close to dying as it's possible for him to be, wounds deep and awful, and he gulps what he needs immediately, teeth tearing through Harry's flesh like razor-sharp knives. It's a burning hot agony, but quickly it translates to that horrifyingly familiar feeling, that spark of wet heat thrumming through his veins, tearing down his spine, stroking his muscles all the way to his hands and feet. Harry's body goes limp, and all he can feel is that pulse, that *drag, drag, drag*, as Tom drains him in thirsty swallows.

It only takes a minute or two for him to feel Tom shifting, breaking away to move Harry's limbs, wrap him up inside his lap, tongue lapping at his skin.

"Thank you," Tom murmurs into his hair, kissing him softly, his temples, his forehead, his neck. And then he's biting down again, this time Harry's wrist, where the blood rushes close to the skin. He jerks weakly, moaning, grey spots already starting to appear in his vision.

Tom's taking a hell of a lot*,* he realises softly, looks down and sees the wounds beneath him closing, the torn flesh wetly mending itself, feels Tom's grip get stronger as he starts to take more and more of Harry's weight. Harry doesn't understand - Tom's ok, seems like he's taken all that he needs... *so why is he still drinking?*

"That's enough, I can't," he manages to say, but the words float away, his eyes rolling back. His whole consciousness is pinned down to that sweet pressure on his arm, only vaguely aware of someone stroking his side, the way Tom nuzzles into the wound like a pleased cat.

There's another bite, another burst of pleasure, in his other arm, his breath thick and syrupy, filling his lungs with warmth as he inhales through it, smiling even as his fingertips go numb. Tom's never taken this much before, and Harry finds he quite likes it, feels like he's floating

in a warm bath. There's a distant alarm sounding in the back of his head though, one that whispers to him: *he's going to kill you, he can't stop and he's going to drain you dry, Harry, stay alert, you need to watch, need to find a chance-*

Tom pauses, watching with curious eyes as Harry pushes him, mumbles something illegible.

"A little more," he coaxes, "just a little more and we can stop, ok darling? I promise," and there's another hot sting, further up his arm, another honeyed *pull*, and really, that does it, his limbs flop, eyelids weakly fluttering. His hand on his lap is shining red, cloaking skin that looks too pale, almost blue, but there's nothing he can do, everything's crumbling and he can hear something, a steady, slow throb, strange sweet music. The world comes to him in short flashes, and Harry grits his teeth and forces his eyes to open, pours all his energy into staying awake.

Tom is carrying him now, he watches as they step over the mess of tissue and death that is Draco, and then Lucius. Beneath him, Tom's body is warm for once, flush with blood, and he almost skips as he walks, glancing down at Harry and gleefully smiling when he sees him watching. It's amazing how quickly he's recovered, the power in his steps, how easily he manages Harry's weight, his dead limbs swinging in the air.

Tom takes them across the room, right out the door and into the garden patio.

Harry stares up at the stars, frozen and impassive, flecking the fabric of early night. He's shivering, can see his breath in exhausted weak puffs, but then again, he's been shivering for a while. Tom's voice is a steady, deep companion, murmuring words of encouragement into his ears, telling him *how proud he is, how they're so close, finally, so close to what they've wanted for so long*.

The garden is beautiful in the quiet darkness: deep shadowed hedges carving out an otherworldly maze, silvery rose bushes opening up to sigh under the indigo sky. He can smell them from here, sweet and fragrant, mingling with the coppery scent of his own blood. A few paper lanterns lit towards the side of the house throw just enough soft orange light to see the looming skeleton of the manor, huge and aristocratic under the moon.

His gaze lazily skims over the shadows, landing on something, a long rectangular shape glowing in the light, and as they draw nearer, Harry feels a weak slither of surprise thread through him.

"'s that..." he manages to slur out, and Tom smiles as he gently places Harry on the freezing stone surface, delicately arranging his limbs so he's curled on top, head pounding with dizziness at the change in position.

"Yes, my love," Tom whispers as he strokes Harry's hair, "it is." He's gone again before Harry can say anything.

Time blurs together - he loses seconds, minutes, maybe hours. He's painfully aware that Tom hasn't closed the bite wounds, and they continue to bleed, the blood a sluggish trickle now. He can hear the soft noise the drops make as they fall on the ground, a steady pitter patter as

his life leaks out of him. Even though he's dying, he manages to feel the shock, can't stop the confusion swimming around in his mind.

Why? is the one question he can't answer. Why has Tom bought him to what looks like the same fucking altar?

Slowly, the noise of his blood is replaced by something else, a strange, steady scrape that grows louder and louder. It seems like a monumental effort, but Harry turns his head, angle just enough to see Tom's hands buried in two heads of white hair, dragging the bodies behind him in a surprisingly impressive feat of strength.

"What," Harry murmurs, his voice painfully weak, barely audible. "are you doing? I don't understand."

Tom has a look on his face that Harry's seen before. It's pure triumph.

"You've done so well," he says soothingly, letting the bodies (or what's left of them) fall to the floor underneath the altar with a dull thwack. A soft breeze runs through Harry's hair, caresses his cheeks, and he sips it in, enjoying the way it washes the smell of blood from his nose for a moment. "I never doubted us for a second, always knew you could do it," Tom continues, coming to stroke hair back, press a sticky kiss to his lips. "My clever boy, my perfect boy."

Harry can't kiss back even if he wanted to, can't move at all, limbs dead and lifeless beneath him. He's beginning to suspect that was the point.

"Are, are you," he starts, but he can't even make himself say the words, just feels the tears of horror spill over his cheeks.

Tom shushes him, wipes his tears away with gentle fingers, kissing him again, lips so soft and familiar. "Don't cry, my love, it's ok. The pain doesn't last long, I promise, just remember it will end, you'll survive it, and I'll be here waiting," he murmurs, and Harry's just so appalled, so utterly heartbroken that he can't bring his lips to move, just cries silently, wetly, even as Tom rises again.

He listens, eyes squeezed shut, to some strange, wet ripping noise as Tom systematically tears open the corpses, choking a little as what he knows is blood sloshes over his torso in spurts, blanketing his body, soaking through his clothes. It's cold, wet, disgusting, and with each wash of liquid he sobs a little harder. He opens his eyes, refusing to think about what's surely in his mouth, up his nose, the way he can start to hear the flies, even in the English cold, the same, familiar buzzing as a sandy dune, months ago.

"All those people," he says eventually, watching Tom run his fingers along Harry's body, wetting them before drawing out strange symbols on his legs, his chest, his head, a familiar blade shining from where it lies, discarded on the floor. "Draco, Lucius... Salazar, they weren't for you." Tom's movements are fluid, practised. *When did he learn this*, Harry asks, but he knows the answer.

Tom smiles at him fondly. "No," he admits softly, "they were yours."

Harry wants to throw up. He's utterly terrified. Tom stands back, quietly watching; already they can both feel it. There's something building in the air, some awful foreboding, a fracturing of reality, as whatever they've done splinters the space in front of them, reaches down, down to somewhere they should never have disturbed.

"What have you done?" Harry's not sure he even says the words out loud. His breath is getting caught in his chest, ribs struggling to rise. He knows what comes next - it's his last opportunity to stop this, and his gut twists in frustration at his utter helplessness. He wants to wail, run far, far away. But Tom knows this. It's why he drained him dry first.

"Let me," Tom whispers lovingly into his ear, body a warm weight pressing into Harry. He's got the knife in his hand now, slashes it across his wrist in one easy motion, grins even as the line opens up and starts to weep blood. It's macabre, an awful, debilitating wound, but Tom just calmly leans over him, lets it drip over his numb body. He's sacrificing Harry's own blood, Harry thinks, a little hysterically, as he imagines it - a dark red fog, billowing out into his bloodstream, Tom and him, combined together, one linked organism. He feels drugged... or is he just dying?

"Tom... I can't, I don't want this," he hears himself reply. The fingers of Tom's unharmed hand card carefully through his hair, tilting his head back so their eyes can meet. His expression is fond, Harry's blood smeared around his mouth, crimson against the smooth white of his skin. A beautiful demon.

"You can, darling. And you will," he says simply, lips curling.

Harry knows when the ritual completes. There's a pause, a moment that hangs in the air, and then he falls, straight down, the air rushing past him, swallowed up in an instant.

Chapter End Notes

AND ALL IS FINALLY REVEALED

i've gotta say, i was supposed to post this next week but i was too excited! i can't quite believe this is now almost at 70k words, and just one more chapter to go!

thanks for all your lovely comments on the last couple of chapters too - it's honestly been so nice to read, i've been smiling the whole time!

set free

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Harry opens his eyes.

Everything is completely, utterly still. The silence is so intense that even the steady, comforting beat of his heart has vanished, and as he shifts to his feet there's no sound of his legs against the ground, no whistle of breath.

He's sitting on some kind of tiny island, only about ten feet across. It's more of a mound of wet, cold mud, sitting smack bang in the middle of an ocean of black water. The surface of the water doesn't move, a vast, shining pool skimmed by a white fog that hangs in the air, drifting wetly past his skin. It grows thicker as it floats upwards, until it obscures the sky, a heavy, hanging whiteness above, at odds with the black water beneath. Wherever this place is, it's freezing; he can't feel his fingers.

He opens his mouth, flinching as the word rings out. "Hello?"

The silence swallows it up immediately. There's no response, not that he really expected one.

He pushes up to his knees, crawling over to the edge. His own face emerges, reflected in perfect parallel: white and terrified, eyes wide, short hair slicked to his scalp with the moisture in the air. A bead of condensation tumbles off his jaw, slipping into the water with a faint splash. His reflection's eyes flutter, like he's blinking. Harry leans closer; the blinks are just a second too late, a strange delay that has him suddenly breathing a little quicker. Shivering, he peers down until his nose is almost touching the surface, trying to catch that tiny lag.

Wait, he thinks. That's- that's not a reflection. It's something else, bobbing closer to the surface - him, but not him: the face is too small, oddly pointed, hair lighter and eyes wide open, *dead, unseeing--*

Harry recoils, slamming backwards even as he can't look away. The other Harry's eyes grow wider and he smiles, features rippling until they look much more like his own, and Harry has just enough time to choke in half a breath before two pale, dripping hands reach up to take hold of his shoulders and he's dragged down into the water.

It's a wall of coldness, the air driven from his lungs as he breaches the surface. The grip on his shoulders is ironclad, and no matter how hard he thrashes, desperately kicking upwards, he just pulled further down into the darkness.

His chest burns with the urge to breathe, panic clawing at him as the light begins to fades. Water invades his nose, soaking through his clothes, pressing insistently down on him from all sides, and he's hit with this overwhelming feeling of hopelessness.

Despite all of Tom's plans, there's nothing he can do here but die.

Down and down he goes, reeled in by the insistent grip of whatever it is that's clinging on to him, stealing him away, until slowly, the froth of his frantic movement begins to clear, and he's left... drifting. Somehow it's actually really peaceful, Harry starts to think, watching his hands start to go lax, barely feeling the water pull through the gaps in his fingers.

It feels like he's floating away. Maybe dying won't all be that bad?

And then there's a voice in his head: *it wasn't*, he hears, and through his blurry, water-stained vision he catches a dark smudge beneath them, fracturing out of the lake floor, a blackness that just keeps going and going. He has no time to prepare: it grows, filling his line of vision until the next moment he's in it, temperature somehow plunging even further.

The next thing he knows the ground is veering up to meet him, body slapping against a hard, silty surface. For a second his tired lungs give one more attempt to suck in frigid, salty water, choking and choking as his ribs start to protest, and then all of a sudden there's a weird *pop* and he can breathe again.

Harry rolls over and retches, trying desperately to expel the water from inside of him. He can feel it rising in his throat and spluttering out his mouth, but nothing's coming out. He's still underwater, he realises distantly, staring down at his wet, white-knuckled grip on the sodden material of his trousers. Somehow he's breathing it in, water pulling into his mouth with every sharp inhale.

Everything feels dream-like and hazy, shaded in gloom, and strange, shadowy shapes waver and flicker in the distance like a mirage. A tiny pinprick of light winks down from above, a strange, crimson moon, like a slither of stained iodine. They must be miles and miles under, he thinks numbly, he should be crushed by the weight of the water above him.

A cold ripple from behind has him turning, limbs uncooperatively slow as they struggle to adjust to the change in gravity.

The other-him stands a few feet away, watching. "Don't be scared," he says gently as Harry freezes. He really is a carbon copy of Harry, black hair floating around his head like a dark halo, skin shining pearly in the darkness. "I'm here now, I've got you."

Harry's too busy trying *not to lose his mind* to really reply properly. "Voldemort?" he rasps out, surprised at how tinny the sound is.

Other-him smiles slowly. "No. No, I'm not Voldemort," he says, and then waits patiently for Harry to muster up his next question.

"What- what are you? The ritual worked, didn't it? Where is this place?"

"It worked," other-him confirms, before walking towards Harry, frozen in place. "Come with me now," he coaxes, reaching down to take his hand.

For some reason Harry lets the other-him pull him along, down towards the centre of the canyon. There's a knot in his stomach as he lets himself be moved forward, other-him pausing to wait each time Harry's steps slow. As they move bubbles latch on to the surface of their skin and then flitter off, up on their long journey towards the surface.

They walk for minutes, maybe hours, until the light begins to grow thin and weak. Harry takes a deep breath, clawing together his thoughts. According to Lucius this is hell. He needs to get out - and if there's even the slightest possibility to escape with his soul intact, he has to find it.

"What's your name?" he eventually probes, knees beginning to ache. It's impossible to tell how far they've gone.

Other-him looks back at him over his shoulder, eyes creasing. "Mors," he says, an irreplicable accent twisting the word, before: "watch your step."

Harry hasn't noticed the ground sloping too intensely, but when he looks around he sees the earth rising up on all sides, the silt giving rise to a jagged stone floor. They're reaching level ground, the centre of the pit, he realises, peering curiously ahead.

Ahead of them, dark tangles sway in the current like drips of ink. As they draw closer, the black lines start to resolve into gigantic, slender trees, taller than any Harry's seen before, reaching up and up with spindly fingers to where the surface taunts them, hundreds of miles above. He furrows his brow as he cranes his neck: are they branches or roots? He can't tell - they seem to have no beginning or end.

Mors leads him down to where the trees twist around a path, ushering them further and further into the strange forest until the ground evens out into pillowy silt again and they're surrounded by a thousand weaving shadowy trunks. Harry suddenly feels very small and very lost.

"I know. It must be very confusing," Mors says kindly, almost as if reading his mind. "But you don't have to worry. You're safe here."

"Safe from what?" Harry asks slowly.

"You're not supposed to be in this place," Mors replies after a pause. He taps his hand on one of the trees, sliding it down a few inches. Something in the water shudders. "It took a lot to get you here."

Harry stares. It's odd seeing his own face looking back at him, watching his lips part and his voice come out. He keeps catching on tiny idiosyncratic familiarities - the mole on his neck, the way his one of his eyebrows is a fractionally more angled than the other. It's like looking in a mirror and seeing your reflection move differently; there's something so *wrong* about it.

"You're a witch," he forces himself to say. "Is this the part where you offer me power in exchange for my-" he swallows, "for my soul?"

Mors' smile grows fractionally wider. "Not quite," he says, before running his eyes over Harry's body and lingering near his chest. For a second they swim red, until they fade back to a familiar green. It reminds Harry of Tom, and for a moment he wishes the other boy was here. And then he remembers the feeling of his blood sucked out of him until his organs began to fail, and he wishes Tom was here so he could rip him apart.

"I've been waiting for you, you know," Mors says eventually. "All this time, alone down here," he sighs. "I'm so glad you've finally come."

What game is he playing? Harry wonders. Is this how all rituals go - is this what Tom went through with Voldemort?

"Where *is* 'here'?"

"My jail," Mors answers, looking up. Harry follows his gaze to the surface, lashed with moonlight and glimmering like liquid silver. It seems so unreachable, and suddenly the amazement is replaced by a growing claustrophobia. He'll never get out, not on his own.

"In a little pocket, tucked away outside of... well, outside of everything," Mors continues, turning back to Harry. "But you found me. I mean, you had a little help," he sighs out a laugh, bubbles floating up. "Tom. What a clever boy, turning Salazar into the key. I don't think he knew what he was doing but I'm glad things turned out like this."

A trickle of unease runs down Harry's spine at the adoring look Mors gives him. Then it clicks.

"I'm dead, aren't I?" Harry says slowly, letting the realisation sink in.

Mors' eyes hold his for a beat before he replies. "Yes."

Harry supposes he should feel more than just a faint echo of surprise, but in reality that's all he can muster up. "Right."

The hand on his shoulder startles him, warm and firm. "But you can go back," Mors whispers. "We can do it together."

Harry shakes his head, closing his eyes. "No." he says finally. He can't do that.

Mors' hand leaves him, and he almost laughs at how much it hurts to have even that little slither of comfort taken away. "It's ok," Mors says. "Time is a little different down here. We have as long as you need."

At that Harry's eyes crack open. "What do you mean?"

"We're outside of time - we can spend a thousand years here and when we go back we'll be inserted right into the moment that you came here." Mors sighs, pushing his hair out of his eyes in a gesture that is so unmistakably Harry that he feels his stomach flip. "I wouldn't recommend that though, Harry. Any longer than a few years and it might be difficult to... readjust."

Harry's blood runs cold. "A few years..." he can't help but repeat, looking around him again. *Years* down here, where sound has no echo and his body can't quite move properly and the only thing around is an endless ocean of cold, dark *nothingness*?

Mors nods. "You can chose not to go back, of course. But I'm afraid there's really no other way out."

He doesn't know what expression he's making but Mors' face softens. "I'm sorry Harry. If there was any other way for me to help you I would. But I can't send you back alone." Tenderly, he reaches out to cradle Harry's face, before moving it to gently splay over his chest. "I'll need you to help me."

Harry stares into his own face, dizzy. His eyes are such a melancholy shade of green, so flat and muddy through the water, the pupils so small, like tiny dots of empty nothingness. He suddenly recalls one of the teachers at Wool's telling him that the pupil itself is a hole, down into the middle of the eye, and as soon as the thought swims to the surface the world shifts a little and he's tipping forward, right into Mors' pupil, stomach flipping as the world rushes by and sinks down, down-- "*for when you gaze long into the abyss, the abyss gazes also into you,"* rings out mockingly--

And he's standing once again, staring, with Mors' fingers hovering above his chest.

"Ah, sometimes that can happen," he says. "As I said, everything here runs on a different track to outside."

Harry's fingers cut into the flesh of his palm with how hard he clenches his fist, whole body trembling. He'll go insane, he's suddenly sure. Forget a few years. Try months.

He steps back, wanting space, reaching out to rub a shaking hand along his eyebrows. He can't *think*. What's he supposed to do here? Martyr himself, keep his soul whole but his mind torn apart? Do whatever it is that Mors will ask for - and Harry knows exactly what that will be - go back, and what - spend eternity as not quite himself, knowing that all this time Tom had forced it on him, never let him decide for himself? He shoves the betrayal away. He can't think about that right now, it's too tightly interwoven with his emotions, the deep oozing wound in the middle of him that bleeds bright with anguish.

Mors remains quiet, watching.

Taking a quiet breath, Harry raises his head. "What exactly do you need from me?"

"I want to make this easy for you Harry," Mors sighs apologetically. "Why don't we do this together? Tell me what you don't need. I'll only take that." As he speaks his fingers once again press against Harry's breastbone, and there's a horrible, wrenching *tug*, deep inside, a movement of something that Harry has never even been aware of before.

It happens quickly, the words leaving Mors' lips, and then Harry is gasping wordlessly as the awful feeling intensifies, his whole being screaming with *wrongness*. Before his eyes, a small ball of glowing white light starts to peel away from his chest, and he can physically see the

effort required for Mors to draw it out. His face is still painted in the calm, placid smile from before, but now Harry can see the savage glee in his eyes, the hunger.

He already knows what his answer is, the realisation flooding through him like bitter poison.

Mors' gaze is riveted on the light, and he holds it out in front of his face, the glow illuminating the sharp curves of his cheekbones. "Tell me," he whispers. "Let me help you."

And then the light's expanding, pushing into him and the sheer energy in there *hurts*, like the feeling you get when you bite down on ice, a gritty, painful heat, a lick of lemon underneath his fingernails, a sharp, acidic flash, too much--

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Harry cracks his eyes open. His first thought is smothered in a muted dread. What's missing? He scours his memory, looking for any weird gaps, any strange phantom emptiness, but there's nothing. Nothing at all. He can't even remember what happened after the light. Did he even agree to letting Mors violate his soul? For some reason he's certain that the witch wouldn't have been able to do it if he hadn't let it... but he draws a blank. He has the strange feeling that he was down there for much longer than an hour.

His second thought is that his body feels warm, for the first time in a long time. There's warmth, and light, and he could cry with how normal it is. And then the tapping starts to filter in. A light rainfall next to his ear.

Harry turns on his side, easily pushing up from the hard surface he's lying on. His body feels weightless now, compared to down there, every movement effortless. He looks down. He's still in the shirt and trousers he was in, still tacky with fresh blood, every inch of him a gleaming coppery red that still drips.

"Harry," a soft voice calls. Turning, Tom swims into view. His eyes are riveted on Harry, bright with curiosity. "I didn't want to move you," he says, gaze flicking to the stone altar beneath him before greedily taking in Harry again.

"How long was I?" Harry asks flatly.

In a second Tom's in front of him, reaching down and pressing a kiss to his neck, a soft brush of his lips. Harry flinches, remembering the fluttering sensation of teeth tearing into him. A stab of something fragile and hungry blooms through him, but he pushes it down.

Tom killed him.

"Ten minutes," the words are spoken into Harry's jaw. There are bottles of blood littered around them, smashed empty vessels, and Tom notices the direction of his gaze, withdrawing a little. "I poured it into your mouth. I was so thirsty when I woke, my love, I didn't want you to have to feel that."

Harry notices the taste in his mouth now, the wetness in his throat. He turns away, stares down at his hands and then on the floor, at Draco and Lucius, disjointed limbs and dead tissue.

Not quite.

"Look at you," Tom croons, hands fluttering over his body, stroking his cheek, smoothing his hair back. Harry half wants to lean in, bask in his touch, and half wants to snap his wrist. "So beautiful, so perfect. I knew you would be."

Harry still sits there, frozen, as he continues trying to catalogue himself. He barely notices Tom pick him up, settling him in his lap so that they face one another. Harry's taller like this, looking down into Tom's red eyes, and as he starts to come back to himself he hears the words Tom's whispering into his ear, dark and heady.

"...never be apart, we'll do whatever we want, forever always, I promised you I wouldn't let you go-"

His fingers are automatically clinging onto Tom's shirt and he let's go immediately as he notices. "You," he croaks out, feeling Tom's arms tighten around his waist. "Why didn't you tell me?"

He was afraid, already so burnt away inside.

"I couldn't take any chances, I had to take care of you," Tom says softly.

"You should have taken care of yourself," Harry bites thinly.

Tom shakes his head. "It doesn't matter now," he says simply, eyes glinting. "It worked."

Did it?

Harry almost nods along internally before he freezes. That... that thought didn't come from him. That's not his voice, he starts to think, heart beating faster. It's almost impossible to catch, a strange act of doublethink, and if he wasn't so afraid he wouldn't be paying so much attention.

Mors?

I'm you.

He forces down the swell of horror. It's fine. He can cope with that.

What did you take from me? What's gone? he tries to think, but the words keep floating away - it's harder than it might appear to hold on to a discrete sentence in the swirling wasteland of his cognition.

What we wanted to forget.

"Darling?" the touch across the back of his neck is light, ghosting, and Harry leans into it before stiffens.

For some reason it's the term of endearment that does it. "You *killed me*, Tom," he wrenches out. "You bled me dry, you killed me." The words lose all their energy at the end, punching out of him rawly. Why isn't he more angry? He can remember, when he woke down there, the sheer, pulsing fury, the way he wanted to claw into Tom for what he'd done.

"I saved you," Tom says, voice dangerously even. "I set you free." Suddenly there's a pressure around his wrists, pushing them together. Tom holds him still in his lap, casually possessive. Why is he *still* stronger, Harry thinks desperately as he struggles, even after what he's forced Harry to do, to become, why is Harry still so *powerless*?

I can help you.

"No," the word slips out, coated in desperation, and Tom swallows it with his mouth hungrily. Harry bites down, hard, on his lip, blood welling up. He steals it away with his tongue - remembering too late that it's his own - and then Tom lets go.

For a second Harry's surprised, before he takes advantage of the opportunity and *moves*, faster than he's ever moved before.

In the blink of an eye he's a few feet away from Tom, chest heaving. He's starting to get that weird light feeling of hysteria again, where the world just seems tragically amusing.

"'I set you free'," he repeats, closing his eyes, "you sound like a psychopath."

There's a weird pressure in his skull, the corner of his eye. He opens them again, gaze once again pulled to Draco and Lucius' bodies, under Tom's boots. He frowns. There's a prickling feeling under his skin.

You know what that is, don't you? It's faint, and Harry gets the sense that as he starts to figure out how this works he'll be able to shove it away, lock it up in a box somewhere in his mind. But something makes him pause, makes him find that thread and draw it close. His eyes grow distant as the voice picks up speed and energy, excited now that it has more attention.

Salazar isn't dead. It's watching you. There - you can see it, can't you? Look inside the mouth.

Tom is watching him curiously, and Harry ignores him as he peers closer, into the cracked, open jaw of Draco, bruised blue and stiff. There's something hiding in there, something black and thin.

We killed it, Harry thinks, and then the reply echoes through his mind, all the hair on his arms standing up.

You'll never kill it. You can't kill a witch.

"Salazar," he says out loud, eyes flitting to Tom who frowns, cocking his head.

It wont hurt you now, it's too weak. But it will follow you, it will never stop following you. And sooner or later there will be someone who wants to make a deal...

"We didn't kill it." The sense of foreboding grows stronger.

From his seat on top of the altar, Tom kicks the corpse pointedly, sneering. No more blood oozes out. He stops, staring at Harry with narrowed eyes. "Which one was it?" he asks quietly, "Who's in your head?"

Harry grimaces. "Mors," he says out loud, for the first time.

Tom nods slowly, sliding off the altar and prowling closer. "And what does Mors say?" he whispers silkily.

Harry bites down on his lip.

I can put him back, if you like.

What's the price? he asks.

"Harry?"

"I can get rid of him," Harry answers distractedly.

A hand grips his face, forcing it up. "Don't," Tom says dangerously. "Don't listen to it." Harry almost laughs at the hypocrisy.

I've told you before, I want to help. But this needs a lot. You need to do it now, Salazar will run as soon as it's able to.

Tell me, Harry demands, what's the cost? He finds it hard to believe Mors didn't know this from the beginning, dread settling in his stomach. Whatever the answer, it's going to be high.

Time. Potential.

Harry's eyes meet Tom's, dark and assessing, boring searchingly into his own.

What do you mean?

I can leave you one hundred years.

Confused, Harry waits a second as he thinks. 100 years to live? Meaning... I'll age? I'll no longer be immortal?

You won't age. But once the time has passed... you'll be with me again.

Harry inhales carefully, eyes still locked with Tom's. In your jail?

We'll have each other.

I can't.

You'll both die. You're fundamentally still human. Salazar is not and it will swallow you whole. I'm trying to help you.

Harry closes his eyes, ignoring the way Tom's fingers dig into his cheeks a little harder.

I don't really have a fucking choice, do I? he thinks, a little hysterically. One hundred years. It's more than he would have had otherwise.

I won't take more of your soul, I promise. This is enough.

Of course it's enough, Harry thinks, you've trapped me down there with you in that Godforsaken place where time doesn't pass and the only thing around is an endless fucking purgatorial ocean - for the rest of existence.

So we have a deal?

Harry thinks about what Tom has done, how Tom saved him against his will, the way he's always taken and taken, sculpting Harry until there was barely anything left of him. Really, he knew what he was signing up for - Tom had sunk his teeth in when they were ten years old and Harry had just asked for *more, harder*, and hadn't stopped wanting, even when they were lying sticky with blood and death in a wasteland of sand.

Tom saved him. Tom has always saved him.

Yes, he thinks, barely making out the word through the terror he feels. Yes, we have a deal.

Nothing really happens for a beat, and then his eyes open. All of a sudden the knowledge is in his head, he can see with perfect clarity the runes he needs to draw, the wide sweeping arc of the circle, knows exactly how Salazar will *burn* as it's forced back down. A thrill runs through him, looking down at his unbroken fingers, as he thinks about how it much it'll *hurt.*

Salazar knows. Do it now.

Harry head springs up, and he has a moment of seeing Tom's face crease in confusion, and then he's whirling around, sprinting back to Draco's body.

Tom's behind him instantly, icy voice filled with something odd. "Harry, what have you done?" he says calmly. "Harry-"

"No time," Harry bites out, hands scrabbling at the bodies, trying to find blood that's still wet enough to work with. He coats his fingers, begins to draw the circle, all the while keeping an eye on that strange, writhing blackness in Draco's mouth, peeking out.

The blood keeps sticking - it's been left out too long, grown tacky, and Harry growls in frustration as he keeps having to dip his fingers in. He sneers down at his own wrist for a beat, before he digs his nails in and rips.

Tom's hand tightens on his shoulder, but he says nothing, lets Harry use his own blood to frantically draw rune after rune, trying to finish the damn thing before either the image in his head fades or Salazar escapes.

He must lose time, because all of a sudden he's pulled back by Tom, tucked against his body as they both stare down at the circle.

There's a click, and then an awful absence of sound, and suddenly Harry is transported back to that wet mound of dirt, how alone he'd felt, how scared. It's the same air, he can smell it, salty and earthy, that strange sweet fog. Beside him Tom's stiffened too, obviously recognising it as well.

It's done.

It's rather anti-climactic. One minute Draco's body lies still on the floor, the next he's jerking awake, eyes open with horror, and something black wriggles it's way out of his throat, and then his body is once again inanimate, the blackness gone.

Slowly, sound returns to the room, right as Harry's legs buckle.

Something fundamental is slipping out of him, diffusing from his pores and dissipating into the air. There's a brief moment where he forgets who he is, where he is, and all he can do is let himself be consumed by a thrumming, unending panic.

And then he's back, shoved into his body and his mind with all the finesse of a brick to the head.

He's in Tom's arms, and he's moving again, weirdly reminiscent of an hour ago. Harry doesn't think he has the energy to talk, head light, just looks up at the other boy blurrily.

Even from this angle he can read the violence in Tom's expression. He doesn't look down at Harry, stares straight ahead as he silently walks them back into the manor, through the hall, along the corridor, long, measured strides eating up the distance until he's pushing open the door to their rooms.

Despite how stiff with anger he is, Harry is deposited carefully on their sheets. The white linen instantly clouds up with rust.

Tom sits on the side. For a beat he stares, thinking, and then he leans over and rips open Harry's shirt. The material pulls apart like cotton candy. Tom takes the two sides and pulls them off Harry's arms, letting the scraps fall to the floor. He repeats the process with Harry's trousers, his underwear, until Harry lays there, bloody and naked, watching him with half-lidded eyes.

He's so tired. The world falls out of focus again. "You need blood," he hears distantly, and then there's blackness.

He surfaces again when Tom's body cradles his, his lips sealing over Harry's. Blood falls down Harry's throat, and again, it's somehow nostalgic. With every sip, Harry starts to come back to life, energy sparking at his fingertips. Mors is still silent, dived down somewhere into his psyche, giving him space, like he knows Harry will bundle him up and shove him somewhere if he's caught now.

"There we go," Tom says approvingly when Harry finishes his swallow and starts to kiss back, hands coming up to tangle in Tom's hair. They're both filthy, matted with blood and grime. "Come on," he murmurs, tugging Harry up.

He leads him into their bathroom, the huge, clawfooted tub filled and steaming. Harry could cry.

The hot water soothes his skin as he lowers himself down, uncaring that this is Malfoy's bath, that the owner lies mangled in his own garden. Pale skin starts to emerge as he half-heartedly scrubs at the blood. There's the sound of clothes hitting the floor, and Harry looks up as Tom steps in, long, lean body folding itself into the water.

Tom wets his hair, smoothing back the dark locks and leaning back against the other end of the tub. Harry can't drag his eyes away. They're a mess, he thinks distantly, but can't quite bring himself to care. They've ruined each other.

"Tom," Harry murmurs rawly, moving through the water towards him. The light in the bathroom is bright, and it's exactly what he needs, running his fingers over Tom's muscles, his ribs, wiping away the red.

So warm, so light. Nothing like the other place.

Tom lets him settle against his chest, long arms coming up to wrap around him, cocoon him in. "You're all mine now," Tom tells him, fingers finding a ticklish spot on Harry's shoulder and stroking. He says it like a promise.

"Each other's," Harry corrects quietly, after a beat.

There's nobody else for him, and now there never will be. One hundred years with Tom for a lifetime of hell, and he can't quite bring himself to regret it.

Harry worms closer, hands reaching up to wrap around Tom's. His fingers catch on the skin of his own shoulder, where Tom was rubbing, at where a strange raised mark a little like a welt sticks out. Harry fingers it, trying to work out the angular lines.

"What's this?" he mumbles. He's pretty sure it's never been there before - maybe a mark from Mors?

They're pressed together so intimately that it's hard not to feel the way Tom stops breathing. Harry stiffens at the sudden silence and turns, looking up.

Tom's face is wrenched into a fury so cold that Harry's mouth opens, but before he can say anything the look is gone, so quickly that he can't work out if he's just imagined it. Tom shakes his head and grins, but it's more of a snarl than a smile, looking at Harry in hateful admiration before he wipes a wet hand over his face. "Never mind," he says quietly, seething.

It's confusing: for some reason a strange feeling of vindictive satisfaction curls through Harry, exhaled out in the next breath. His fingers find the scar, rubbing it a little for comfort - the movement feels natural - but lets it go.

They stay there until the water cools, a red tide lapping at their skin, pressed as close as they can be. Harry breathes into Tom's wet skin, clings to the coldness, twists their legs together as best he can.

"I want to go back to Libya," Harry whispers eventually, when Tom is stripping down the top sheet from the bed, letting it fall to the floor and leaving a new expanse of clean white. It's not like they need the warmth anymore. Or the sleep.

Tom pauses, turning to look at him consideringly. "Why?"

Harry slips past him, to the open window. It's huge, at least ten feet across, looking out into the dark tangle of the gardens. Outside the breeze is cold and uninviting, but it doesn't bother him anymore. He can just about make out the dark shapes below, the mess they'd left out there. "We need to burn it all down. Nobody can ever find what they found," he calls, climbing over to sit out on the sill, legs swinging in the air.

Tom's body comes to rest next to his, a cold, pressing weight. "I had their whole settlement torched when the altar was retrieved," he says with casual scorn. "There's not a chance of that anymore."

Harry smiles sweetly. "For old times' sake then?"

Tom raises an eyebrow, and Harry leans into him, staring out at where the dawn slowly spreads across the sky, a gentle lavender light. A light rain starts to fall, soft and light, silver threads diving into the hungry earth like a sacrifice.

"What will we do now?" Harry asks after a while, not really thinking much of the question. They don't need a plan. They can do anything - they have a lifetime.

One, at least.

Tom turns to him, beautiful red eyes knowing, and smiles a smile full of dark promise.

He says nothing, and Harry understands exactly what he means.

*

(Two years later, Tom fingers the note in his pocket, the address scrawled in shaking pencil, still smudged with the blood of its writer. He think about the name on the first line, rolls the word in his mouth, but is careful to never, ever let it escape.

Harry can never know, not after his little act of martyrdom. Did he think Tom wouldn't be able to tell, as intertwined with Voldemort as he is?

A single lifetime isn't enough, not for Tom. He wants more. He wants it *all,* forever - Harry doesn't get to decide. A phantom thread of anger floats up, sharp and acrid in his ribs, and he

carefully pushes it down, down in the deep where he locks it away, nestled up against the blood and darkness.

Dumbledore, he mouths to himself, when he certain he's alone, tasting the word with all the fervour of a starved man. *The man who killed a witch.*)

Chapter End Notes

well guys... thanks for sticking with me as i yanked the direction of this story 180 degrees a couple of times (i had no idea it was going to end up where it did lmao) and putting up with my endless cliffhangers. thanks for reading this far - you're awesome and i really appreciate it!

p.s. to confirm, part of what harry decided to give to Mors was the memory of the whole initials carving scene, as his revenge for tom's manipulation

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